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HEADLONG HUGH, The Man to Tie To.

BY JOS. BADGER, JR.



Headlong Hugh, The MAN-TO-TIE-TO;

OR,

The Hunted Miner's Death Grapple.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

AN UGLY BIT OF WORK.

"You're talking foolishly, Miles."

"You lie!"

"What?"

"That's it. Better a fool, though, than a cur, Harry Marqueduc. And if you don't know what that spells, shall I tell you?"

"Come, come, what's got into you, old man? Are you trying to pick a quarrel with me, Rockweed?"

"A fool job, isn't it? Bah!" with a short, insulting laugh. "Why, I might slap your ears up to a peak and you wouldn't even—so!"

The speaker lurched forward, aiming a blow to match his words, only to have wrist caught in a firm grip, which shoved both arm and owner aside for the moment.

A hot flush of anger darkened the handsome face of Harry Marqueduc, but he offered no stroke in return, speaking reprovingly:

"Steady, Miles! You're off your level this evening, and you'll be sorry for it all in the morning. Go home and try to sleep it off."

"Sleep what off?"

"You've been drinking too much, old fellow."

"You lie! Haven't touched a drop—or, if I have, what's that to you? It isn't to drown my sorrow at being jilted by—"

"Careful, Rockweed!"

"You know it, too! And if you wasn't all cur you'd play half-way white and spare the girl from—"

"Will you be quiet, I say?"

But, the liquor-heated young man flung off the hand which sought to restrain him, making a defiant gesture even as he broke forth in tones which carried to a still greater distance and promised to bring eye- as well as ear-witnesses upon the scene.

The sun had gone down behind the western hills, and twilight was rapidly deepening into night there in the unpaved streets of Hardpan; but there was light sufficient for notes to be taken where a bit of sport seemed brewing for the lovers of "scrap and scrimmage."

"A cur you are, Harry Marqueduc, and I'm just the man to prove it! There isn't another man, black, white, or yellow, in all this region who'd play dog in the manger as you are doing with—"

"Will you simmer, I say?"

"With Molly Flickeson, coyote that you are!" harshly cried Rockweed, again foiling the hand which strove to close his rash lips. "She tired of you long ago. Any man in Hardpan could tell you as much. But you—pah! You never could take a hint without it took the shape of a kick, Harry Marqueduc."

"Look out, I warn you, Miles Rockweed!"

"Pooh! Look out, you, if it comes to that! And one thing; don't try to crowd in where you're not wanted, this evening of all, Harry Marqueduc. I'm going—Milly expects me for—"

"Are you crazy, as well as drunken?" came the angry interruption.

"Ha! ha! Does it bite ye so deep, Harry? Does it smart ye to think that I'm cutting in ahead of ye like—Why, you poor dunce!" with a tone of contemptuous pity, as he steadied himself in front of his partner in the Homestake Mine. "Milly asked me to call, and before I leave we'll be next thing to one; engaged, for a fact!"

"You surely are crazy!"

"Not so crazy but what I can speak

the truth far enough to say—you're a liar by the watch, Harry Marqueduc! Milly wants to shake you for a better man; and if you were half-way white you'd take the hint and rack out."

So far Marqueduc had held his naturally fiery temper under control with an iron will, although nearly every sentence crossing those whisky-fumed lips stung him to the quick.

But, there is a limit to everything, and his stock of patience was rapidly growing exhausted.

"Stop right here, I tell you!" he said, in low but stern tones. "I can make allowance for a man in your condition, Rockweed, but when you persist in saying—"

"What is gospel truth: that sweet Milly wouldn't give my little finger for your whole carcass! That I'll kiss her until—"

"Stop, I say!"

"Just make me, will you? Milly is my girl, and loves me more in—"

"That's enough! Drunk or not, I'll call you liar, Miles Rockweed!"

So far the elder member of the Homestake firm had spoken and acted in ugly mockery, yet without betraying anything like positive anger or hatred; but all was changed now.

A scowl distorted his heated visage, and with a savage imprecation he dashed clenched fist full at the unusually pale face of his partner.

Marqueduc warded off the blow with a forearm, at the same time ducking head aside and falling back a pace, speaking quickly:

"Drop it, Miles! You don't know what you're doing, and so—"

"Call me liar, will ye? What I'm doing, is it? I'll pound the whole face off o' you, you cur!"

Another blow was similarly wasted, but the effort helped to anger the retreating man, and there was a thinly veiled menace in what came next.

"Let up, Rockweed, or you'll be sorry for all this. You're drunk: if I didn't know that much, I'd—will you let up, I say?"

"Make me—why don't you make me, then?"

"If I wanted to fight—"

"Pah! You wouldn't fight a sick kitten, Harry Marqueduc!"

"You're not fit to fight, Miles. If you were—but, go 'way, I tell you, man! You're drunk—too drunk for any decent man to fight with."

"And you're a low-lived cur and coward, Marqueduc!"

Again the whisky-flushed miner crowded forward, striking viciously as he came with right hand and left, growing all the more enraged because his partner still retreated, doing nothing more than dodge or ward off the blows aimed at his head and face.

But, this could not last long.

One foot caught against a projecting stone, throwing its owner off balance for a moment: long enough for Rockweed to fairly land one of his heavy blows, hard knuckles breaking skin and staining that temple with red.

This proved to be the final provocation, and with an angry cry Marqueduc returned the blow; then the two men came together, in a desperate grapple just where moonlight and shadow blended.

There was no thought of retreat, now; no checking memory of fraternal affection; naught save vicious anger and fierce desire to defeat.

Rack and forth the antagonists swayed, turning rapidly as they wrestled, paying no heed to the startled cries which were coming from more quarters than one, as curious eyes at length caught sight of the brutal "fun."

So far as muscular powers went, the twain were admirably matched, and there is no telling just how the struggle would have terminated had the Homestake pards been permitted to fight it out as they began; but, that was not to be.

A wild, fierce cry burst from the lips of Miles Rockweed as his tensely strained muscles gave way all at once, the two men falling to earth in an awkward heap.

Marqueduc swiftly broke away from those unnerved arms, staggering back and dashing the hair from over his eyes, expecting nothing else than that his liquor-crazed partner would scramble up to renew his assault.

Instead, Rockweed lay as he had fallen, struggling feebly as a man may when suddenly disabled, or—

"Hellow, hyar!" cried a harsh voice, as a burly fellow came hurrying to the spot. "What's the racket, aryhaw, critter? Who is—you, Harry?"

"Yes. He made me. I didn't want to fight, for I knew he was—you know you're drunk, Miles!"

Marqueduc was hardly aware of his own words, so intensely had he been stirred up by this wholly unexpected trouble. And, as if to make a bad matter far worse, just then he caught sight of a well-known face: that of Seneca Spottsround, guardian of the girl whose name had been so outrageously brought forward by Miles Rockweed.

"What's all this?" briskly spoke the mining magnate, as he came forward with a bustle, a single important unit in what was rapidly growing to be a crowd. "I hope there hasn't been—who's hurt?"

"I had to do it, sir," huskily spoke Marqueduc, trying to right his disordered garments with nervous hands. "He forced it upon me, although I tried my level best to get away without hurting the poor fellow."

"A lie—oh!"

A sharp, gasping cry as of intense agony came from the prostrate man, but rallying, Rockweed partly raised his body on one arm, his other hand pointing unsteadily toward Marqueduc, as he fiercely cried further:

"Lies—all lies! He cut me! I never thought—you devil! I'm killed—and you—hold him! He's cut me—all to pieces!"

Harry Marqueduc recoiled with a gasping breath at this bewildering accusation; but, even then he had no idea of the actual truth. He thought it but the wild raving of a liquor-bemused wretch.

There were others present, now, with cooler wits or less excitement, and from among those who flocked closer around the principals in that brief-lived struggle, one clear voice made itself heard above the rest:

"Fetch a light, somebody! There's been ugly work—mighty ugly work going on here, I'm dubious!"

"He cut me!" repeated Rockweed, his voice sounding strange and unnatural in the ears of his partner. "I never thought—stabbed me—like a dog!"

"I didn't mean—I tried to get away, but he wouldn't let me!"

"A light—fetch a light, somebody!" still more sharply repeated Seneca Spottsround, now kneeling near the prostrate figure; for, like one at the end of his strength, Miles Rockweed had sunk back, groaning hollowly.

Ugly mutterings were beginning to make themselves heard among the growing crowd, and some words were let fall which penetrated the half-stupor which had come upon the younger partner in the Homestake: words which brought a rush of blood to his face and an angry glow into his eyes for the moment.

Murder? He do murder, and that upon his friend, his almost brother?

"It's a lie—all a lie!" fiercely cried Marqueduc, as he cleared a space around himself, then moved toward that partner. "I never hurt Miles. I only stopped him from hurting me. I knew he was too drunk to mean all he said, and so—speak up, old man! I never hurt you, did I, Miles, lad?"

Just then a lantern was hastily brought upon the scene, its yellow rays falling over all, showing Miles Rockweed struggling to a sitting posture, one trembling

hand rising to point toward Harry Marqueduc, as he repeated with husky fierceness:

"You stabbed me—in the back! You murdered me—like a dog! I swear you—hang him—devil!"

He fell back, screaming aloud in agony, and that light shone upon a knife-hilt protruding from the young miner's back!

CHAPTER II.

CHARGED WITH MURDER MOST FOUL.

An ominous silence fell over that gathered group, men shrinking involuntarily from the one who stood charged with murder most foul.

For few who saw, then, could doubt that murder had been done.

As poor Miles Rockweed lay, gasping and moaning, the lantern-rays showed all eyes how surely the deadly weapon had been planted; scarcely an inch to the left of the spinal column, almost in the center of that broad, muscular back; driven so surely home that the brass guard was hidden by the cloth it pressed against.

All around was blood; red, ghastly, ominous.

Only a strong arm and sure hand could have driven that blade of steel so certainly home to the seat of life!

Harry Marqueduc stood like one half-paralyzed; shivering slightly, but otherwise deprived of the power of motion for the moment, staring at his wounded partner, seeing yet not able fairly to comprehend.

Around them were pale faces and shrinking forms, while even Seneca Spottsround, usually so cool and composed that naught outside of his own life could stir or shake him, now shrunk back from the wounded miner, to gaze in half-doubt, half-horror into the face of the other partner.

Only a brief pause. Just long enough for an ordinary breath to cover. Then—

Again those ugly mutterings made themselves heard, this time shaping into words, the grim purport of which could not be mistaken, even by one so completely dazed as Harry Marqueduc appeared to be.

"Stabbed in the back!"

"Never give the pore lad any ghost o' show!"

"It's jest bloody murder; plum bloody murder, mates!"

"An' the law'll never tech him, nuth'er!"

"Ones it's lynch-law!"

Those words seemed to give the right cue, for a half-score voices caught at the sound and lifted it higher, clearer, more fiercely menacing, until at least one-half of all those congregated were crying aloud for a noosed rope and a speedy hanging!

At first Harry Marqueduc glanced from man to man with eyes in which a hunted light was growing, half-shrinking from those ugly sounds; but then, as the cry for human blood in exchange for that which had already been shed grew louder and more vicious, he sprang into life and action, breaking the strange spell which the sight of that blood-surrounded knife had cast upon him.

With a choking cry he sunk upon his knees by the side of his disabled partner, catching one of those clammy-feeling hands between his own with feverish pressure as he huskily spoke:

"I never hurt you, lad! I never did that; you know I didn't, Miles!"

A husky groan; a brief glance up toward that ghastly pale face; then the hand was jerked away, as in unrelenting hatred.

Marqueduc shrank back as from a blow in the face. But, rallying, he renewed his broken-toned plea, for the moment seemingly unaware of those ugly cries which assailed all ears save his own; cries which surely presaged another tragedy, fully as ugly, if a bit less mysterious, than that which had so recently taken place.

"I didn't—you know I couldn't hurt you—like that, Milesy, old boy? I never—tell 'em all I never did it, pardy! They're saying—just as though 'twas in me to harm you—like this! Tell 'em I never hurt you, Rockweed!"

Another gurgling moan, then, as though stirred by the piteous appeal which was being made, Miles Rockweed partly turned, and as Harry lent him eagerly swift support, he pressed a hand to his saturated clothes, then lifted it with a swiftly savage nerve, branding that pale face with scarlet as he cried aloud:

"You stabbed me—in the back—curse you, Harry Marqueduc!"

Like one stung in the eyes by some poisonous reptile the one thus bitterly branded shrunk quickly away with a muffled cry, while Rockweed, no longer supported by the arms of his younger partner, fell heavily back to blood-stained earth like a dead man.

"It's bloody murder, lads; and what does that call for?" demanded a deep-toned voice after a moment's silence.

Seneca Spottsround rose to his feet from where he had crouched through all this, flinging up a hand as though to command silence, then speaking sharply:

"Go for help, some of you fellows. Find a doctor and fetch him—ha! Branscombe, you're just the man most needed right here!" with an echo as of joy at sight of a tall, gaunt figure coming toward the spot.

"What's wrong? Who is it? Make way, please, gentlemen!" spoke the man of medicine, as he gained the outer edge of the crowd.

All present knew the doctor, and an opening appeared as by magic, permitting the physician to win the side of the wounded miner without further trouble.

"Do your level best, Branscombe," muttered Spottsround, in an aside, which was probably louder-toned than he intended. "It may mean two lives instead of one if you can save the poor lad!"

"All right. Don't crowd. Give me room," curtly responded the man of medicine, falling to work by the uncertain glow of the none too clean lantern.

Not until then did Harry Marqueduc make a move, so utter was the stupefaction into which that fierce denunciation had cast him; but now, as though eager to aid the doctor, he started forward, only to be checked by a heavy hand falling upon an arm and turning him partly around.

A burly, low-browed fellow stood there with grim show of teeth as Marqueduc made low cry of recognition.

"What do you want, Carswell?"

"Jest to drap a hint that ye don't want to try any break fer tall timber, pardner," was the coarse-toned answer. "It's bloody murder, from the looks of it all, an' ef you can't cl'ar your han's, then—why did ye cut him, anyway?"

"I never—"

"He swore to it, an' thar's his blood a-brandin' of ye right now!"

"I never—curse you! Hands off!" cried Marqueduc, savagely, now driven past all prudence by the horrible coils which seemed closing so surely about him.

With half-mad fury he dashed a hard-clenched fist full into that low-browed face, sending the burly citizen reeling dizzily, back into the startled crowd, then whipping forth a brace of revolvers from the belt which girded his middle, Harry waved all away, crying aloud:

"Back—stand back, I tell ye, one and all! I'm guiltless—I never harmed so much as a hair of yonder poor lad's head, and I'll not yield to a dog's death! Back, I say! Crowd me now, and I'll shoot—and shoot to kill!"

Those in his immediate front recoiled a bit, for Marqueduc looked like one half-crazed by now, and those fiercely brandished weapons held more deaths than one if the worst should come.

Seneca Spottsround flung up a hand as though in protest, but ere he could make his voice fairly heard above the grow-

ing tumult, a muscular fellow sprang forward in the rear, striking heavily as he came, sending the Homestake owner blindly forward upon his face in the dust.

Savage cries and curses burst forth in spreading storm at this, and those who had shrunk and shivered before those black muzzles, were now only too eager to crowd forward and fall upon the stricken miner.

But Seneca Spottsround acted even more swiftly, and he it was who stood astride that briefly unconscious man, waving back the ugly crowd and speaking in shrilly commanding tones:

"Steady, friends! Hold hard, I beg of ye, one and all!"

"Hang him! Lynch the bloody cuss! Kill him as he butchered poor Rockweed!"

A score of cries, similar in purport, rang forth upon the evening air, but Spottsround was undaunted. He stooped to secure those revolvers, rising again with weapons in plain view, while adding:

"Wait, I tell you, gentlemen! Although it looks mighty black for Marqueduc, still there may be some mistake. He says he never cut poor Rockweed—"

"Who did cut him, then?"

"That's what we want to find out, Beebe. Miles may have fallen upon his own knife, and so—"

"That's in his own belt, as you can see for yourself, sir," sharply cut in another of the gathering, pointing toward the wounded man, where the lantern-light shone upon a metal-bound hilt recognized by all.

Mr. Spottsround seemed taken aback by this awkward fact, but quickly rallied, going on to say:

"Well, if not that way, then some other. I can't make it seem right that Marqueduc would commit such a horrible deed, even in anger, and so I ask you: wait until we can look deeper into the matter."

"And so let him escape altogether, is it?" demanded the fellow with bulldog face and jaws.

Just then Marqueduc began to stir, recovering from the heavy blow which laid him low; and before speaking further, Mr. Spottsround aided the accused to arise, lending him a strong arm in support while facing the threatening crowd.

"He can't escape while the whole town is on guard, and for our own credit we can't afford to act too hastily. Give him time; wait until poor Miles can rally strength sufficient to tell the whole story of how it happened, and then—What is it, Branscombe?"

Seneca Spottsround turned quickly in that direction, for the doctor was rising to his feet, leaving the young miner lying there in his own blood.

"He'll never do that, Mr. Spottsround," soberly spoke the doctor.

"How?"

"Because he's already past speaking, and will never—"

"Dead? Surely not—not dead?" harshly cried the mining magnate.

The doctor's reply, if any was made, was drowned by the fierce cries which burst from the angered crowd, as it surged forward, checked only by the revolvers which Spottsround leveled, and over which he cried out:

"Back, or I'll harvest a full crop of dead men!"

CHAPTER III.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR CHAMPION.

That dangerous rush was checked, if only briefly, and raising his tones until his voice rang forth clear and distinct above the other sounds, Seneca Spottsround called for backing from all lovers of law and order.

"It is justice we want, not misrule or anarchy!" he cried, in fine indignation, as a more friendly movement made itself felt. "Will one sort of murder make amends for another assassination?"

Will hanging this young man fetch poor Rockweed back to life?"

"Mebbe not, but it'll keep him from butcherin' nother pore critter, anyway," savagely growled Carswell, yet plainly fearing to head a rush while those menacing muzzles were so prominent.

"Prove it, first!" cried a young fellow with red hair and neat garments, as he pushed through the gathering to join accused and champion. "I'm with you, dad, from start to finish."

"Make way, there, please," commanded the elder Spottsround, linking an arm through that of the accused without putting away his gun. "To the lock-up! All men who like a fair deal will rally to us, now!"

"They're gwine to run him out o' camp afore—"

"You lie, Ginger Chump!" sternly interrupted the elder guard. "All I ask for is this: prove Marqueduc guilty of stabbing Rockweed—"

"Didn't he swar to that same, then?"

"Faith, an' 'tis I that heard him say that same, thin!"

"If guilty, he shall be punished to the full extent of the law. I will be the first man to fall on to the rope when proven. But until then I say—to the lock-up, lads!"

And so it was.

That voice seemed a magic spell so far as a goodly proportion of the crowd was concerned, and, forming a compact body around the accused, he was hurried off and away, only to halt again when fairly within the four rude walls of the "City Jug," himself too intensely agitated for coherent speech, it seemed.

Marqueduc essayed to thank Seneca Spottsround for his timely aid, but was cut short almost harshly.

"Wait. What I've done was not so much for your sake as for that of decency, of law, of order. I am not deciding as to your guilt or your innocence—"

"I never—as God bears witness, I never stabbed poor Miles!"

"Pray that you may be able to convince others of that, sir, for if not—"

Mr. Spottsround turned away with his sentence unfinished, but there was no room left for doubting his full meaning.

Arrangements were quickly made for an armed guard until something definite was known, then Mr. Spottsround left the rudely built jail and hurried away to the scene of the tragedy; there to find still excited citizens, whose first eager words made known to him that Miles Rockweed still lived!

"I thought him dead when I spoke," explained Dr. Branscombe, in lowered tones, as the wealthy mine-owner gained his side. "He still lives, but—"

"There is hope, then?"

"Of course, since breath lingers," making a significant gesture as he added: "Don't bank too high on that, though!"

"Can he bear removal? If so, there is my house, which is—"

"Too far. The hotel must serve. He may live through it, but the chances are all against him, let us do what we may."

Mr. Spottsround was not listening, just then. He turned to the deeply interested crowd and spoke rapidly, bidding some carry the news to the hotel, in order that a room might be prepared for the luckless fellow, while others procured means of conveying him.

Now, as before, obedience was prompt, yet some among the gathering showed symptoms of dislike, if not of actual hostility.

To do all plain justice, however, these ugly feelings seemed inspired by Harry Marqueduc rather than his defender, judging from the words and broken sentences which could be caught as they flew from side to side.

Then, while the wounded miner was being prepared for removal, Seneca Spottsround made a brief speech, during which he explained his recent action with all candor.

While denouncing lynch-law as but a single degree better than cold-blooded

murder, he declared that he would not raise a hand to hinder such punishment after this awful crime had been fairly and squarely proven upon the accused.

"But until then, I'll fight for his life as surely as I would for my own! I'll die before the door of his prison rather than permit another assassination!"

"Whar is he, then?"

"In the calaboose, under armed guard. He'll be safe there. You can't deny that, John. Safe there, to go free if innocent, to pay the full penalty in case this foul deed is surely fastened upon him!"

Little by little the savage thirst for human blood was dying out.

Bit by bit those ominous growls were silenced, and by the time all arrangements were made for removing poor Rockweed to his hotel, the excited crowd had become fairly amenable to calm reason.

No one man contributed as much to this change as did Seneca Spottsround, although other voices took the matter up where he left off. But they were plainly inspired by the mining magnate, and served but as his echo for the moment.

Contrary to expectations, Miles Rockweed bore the pains of removal remarkably well, and so far from being dead when shifted to the bed prepared for him at the hotel, he could give a fairly hearty curse against the treacherous hand which had brought him so miserably low.

As a man might who longed to fairly clear a personal friend, Mr. Spottsround questioned the wounded man; but all efforts to shake that first charge were of no avail.

"He cut me! I swear Harry Marqueduc—oh, he cut me—all to pieces!"

Then Dr. Branscombe exercised his prerogative, clearing the little chamber of all save his chosen assistants, closing and locking the door upon all others.

It had been many a long day since Hardpan felt so deeply stirred up over any single event as this, and there seemed but the one topic of conversation: the quarrel between the Homestake partners.

It promised to be a regular bonanza for the saloons. Men can talk so much more readily with their whistles dampened!

The Arcade was no exception to the general rule, and Big Sandy was kept "on the jump" in order not to neglect any of his patrons, one and all of whom were discussing the cutting scrape.

Prominent among those patrons was the retired prize-fighter, Benjamin Beebe, better known to his cronies, if not to fame itself, as Bulldog Ben; partly from his reputation for dogged grit, but quite as much because of his face itself.

That was, as nearly as possible, a copy of a bulldog; massive jaws, low brows, little eyes which seemed to contain the very essence of wickedness when anger kindled in the compressed brain behind them.

With Bulldog Ben was the rest of "the gang," as they were locally known: Ginger Chump, Dick Tate, Owen Quinn, with several more whose names need not be put on record just yet.

"I couldn't 'a' b'lieved it ef I hedn't seen it with my own two lookin' eyes!" declared an outsider, as he set down an emptied glass and drew a sleeve across his lips in lack of a napkin. "What made him do it, anyhow? I think—I al'ays reckoned them two critters was jest like two lambs o' the same drop-pin'; yes, I did, now!"

Dick Tate laughed sneeringly as he tossed back the dank locks of inky hair which had a fashion of falling over his left eye.

A fairly handsome fellow, too, this young rascal, with his clear skin and big black eyes. A bit too pale, perhaps, hinting at owlish pursuits, if not owlish gravity.

"That's easy—dead easy, cully!" he declared, in tones to match that cynical sneer on face. "How has it been ever since that apple-tree was robbed? A girl

in it; and a girl which even saints might fall out about, too! A girl who is—"

"Bite that off, boy!" harshly interrupted Bulldog Ben, lurching far enough that way to strike an arm with one of his huge paws.

"What's the matter with you, Bully?"

"That's all right, Dicky. You simmer down. The boss wouldn't—"

"I'm my own boss, Bully, but let it go at that. Reasons enough without that particular one. For instance: who but a fool would sign any such articles of partnership? Who but a fool—or a knave!"

"How so, pardner?"

"That everything should go to the other at death of his pard! And now—well, I reckon Marqueduc thought the Homestake was well worth playing the knife for!"

"That's what!" gruffly confirmed Bulldog Beebe, as they ranged by the bar with freshly filled glasses. "He wanted the whole hog, and so—sent his knife clear home in the back of his pard! And that's why I say Harry Marqueduc ought to pull hemp before he's an hour older! He murdered poor Rockweed, without giving him a chance to—"

"You lie, like a mangy cur!"

Sharp and distinct came these words from the front of the saloon, and as all within turned eyes that way, 'twas to behold a tall, broad-shouldered, rough-clad figure just striding over the threshold.

As though to put all doubts aside, that newcomer added:

"You lie by the watch, and you've got to eat those words or—I'll eat you, hide, hair, and all!"

A moment of breathless amazement at such audacity, then Bulldog Beebe rudely shoved a couple of his pals aside, to fairly confront that newcomer, speaking harshly as he did so:

"Who in blazes may you be, that talks so mighty big and loud?"

"A white man, freeborn, and owner of his tongue," came the easy response, as the big fellow came a bit closer. "A man who is proud to own Harry Marqueduc as a friend and pard and—"

"Look out, Bully!" cried a voice in warning from the rear of the saloon. "It's Headlong Hugh, and he's bad medicine!"

"You bet your sweet life it's Headlong Hugh, and he repeats: you're an infernal pack of liars from start to finish! When you call Harry Marqueduc an assassin, you lie from crown to sole and all the way back again!"

"I'll hammer that mug o' yours until—" began Bulldog Ben, in savage rage at thus being bearded in his own kennel; but before he could take more decided action, another pushed to the front.

That other was Dick Tate, a comparative stripling by the side of this long-haired Hercules; but the young rascal was no coward, let his failings be what they might.

Jumping past the burly prize-fighter Dick hurled his glass full at the head of the newcomer, following it up with a still more vicious attack, knife flashing forth and going up for a deadly blow.

If big beyond the ordinary, this Headlong Hugh certainly was not clumsy or sluggish in his movements, since he swiftly ducked to let that heavy glass pass harmlessly over his head, then came with a mighty surge to meet and foil that venomous assault.

One sun-browned hand caught the sinewy wrist as the knife came glitteringly in quest of his life, and with a single twist the weapon was sent flying through the lamplight to the rear of the room.

With scarcely an effort (it looked like) Headlong Hugh knocked his assailant down, then met the savage rush which came from Tate's mates an instant later.

A brief struggle, then Beebe and Ginger Chump were piled atop of Dick Tate, while Headlong Hugh stood with hands on hips, laughing at them.

CHAPTER IV.

HEADLONG HUGH TALKS BUSINESS.

It all took place with a rapidity which was only equaled by the ease displayed by this long-haired Hercules just off the trail, as his dust-covered, weather-beaten garments bore ample evidence.

Dick Tate lay quivering as he fell before that swift stroke, with Bulldog Beebe crossing his carcass, and Ginger Chump sprawling all over, forming a confused medley of legs and arms and heads sufficiently ludicrous to justify the jolly guffaw which followed from the lips of this dare-devil sport from the mountains.

Others could see something of that grim jest as well, but not all present were of that caliber, as Headlong Hugh right speedily found out.

Owen Quinn, left out of that sudden rush through no lack of good will toward his pards, now caught up a heavy chair and jumped toward the Hercules, striking as he came.

"To the divil wid ye, thin! Lay down an'—"

Leaping swiftly aside, Headlong Hugh escaped that vicious stroke, the heavy chair going to wreck as it struck the edge of the bar, half-paralyzing the freckled hands which gripped its back.

"Augh! go take a walk, Irish!" cried the sport, grappling with the fellow and rushing him across the room, then heaving him bodily into air, in spite of his desperate struggles, hurling him headlong through the onedinky window which that side of the saloon could boast.

Quinn vanished amid the crash of sash and merry jingle of broken glass, and apparently assured against further trouble from that quarter, Headlong Hugh wheeled to the right about, each hand coming out from beneath his coat to display a wonderfully business-like revolver, with which he caught the drop like a veritable expert.

Bulldog Ben was scrambling to his feet, as was Ginger Chump, but the sport anticipated them both, calling forth in sharp tones:

"Go easy, there! You're poorer game than I often hunt, but whenever a skunk circles my camp—steady, I tell you! I've got you lined, and I can shoot to a hair!"

"You bet! Me too!"

From the open doorway came this affirmation, and those eyes which almost involuntarily turned in that direction, caught sight of a tall, dark-skinned man crouching just inside the room, back guarded by the wall itself, while his coppery hands gripped butt and barrel of a Winchester repeating rifle, the muzzle of which was coolly, easily moving from side to side, and covering each man before it in turn.

An Indian, past doubting. And just as plainly one who meant to back up whatever Headlong Hugh saw fit to say or to do.

"All right, Chonesta," briskly spoke the Hercules, smiling grimly at the consternation so plainly pictured upon more faces than one, just then.

"Shall I shoot, boss?" asked this latest arrival, his tones remarkably free from accent for one who was undoubtedly of purely Indian blood.

"Not unless I set the example, pardy," quickly checked Headlong Hugh; then adding to the embarrassed roughs: "Go easy, my beauties, unless you're fairly honing for a high lot on the hillside. Some one of you called me by name just a bit ago, but maybe it'll help smooth the way if I give you all a regular knock-down to both of us.

"Yonder you see Chonesta, from the Cherokee Nation. If you don't like his aboriginal handle, give him that which he put on the roll-call at Haskell: Peter Black Dog. By either title he'll bite just as keen and just as deep; don't you begin to doubt it, now!"

"Augh!" growled Bulldog Beebe, viciously, as he eyed first one man and then the other, longing yet fearing to

make a rush in those muzzles. "Curse the bloody Injun—and you with him!"

"That's all right, but don't you go further than cursing, my beauty. For one thing, 'twouldn't be at all healthy. For another—but that can wait a bit longer.

"As for my mother's son, I was christened Hugh Eddlong, although my name has caught a sort of kink since then. Let that go, though. I'm what I am, and a goodly portion of that is—like this!"

"Harry Marqueduc is my friend, and has been ever since he gave the first blow with his pick right where the Homestake Mine now stands.

"I never knew a whiter man than that same Harry Marqueduc, and when I caught such foul birds as you three croaking filth all over his name, I just had to chip—and that's how it started!"

"I'll play even for it all, you mind that, now!"

"Let me know when you feel in the humor for it, will you? That's all right, Bulldog. I can clean you out at any sort of fun and frolic you can turn your hand to; and take on your dirty pals as sort of make-weight. But for now—who says Harry Marqueduc murdered anybody? Who dares to even hint at the like?"

With a rifle and a brace of sixes staring their way, neither one of the toughs felt sufficiently reckless to repeat that charge; but after a brief and embarrassing silence, Big Sandy spoke from his station behind the bar.

"Mind ye, Mr. Eddlong, I hain't sayin' he did do jest that, but—waal, Miles Rockweed was stabbed clean through, an' Harry Marqueduc he's bin tuck to the lock-up fer doin' of it."

Headlong Hugh gave vent to a deep-pitched sound which fell little short of being a mighty oath at this information, his honest visage turning a brick-red with indignation at thought of the bitter black insult thus put upon his sworn friend and comrade.

For a moment or two, even Bulldog Beebe and Dick Tate flinched perceptibly, like men who anticipated a shot by way of wiping out their share in that same insult.

"It's a lie, black as hell itself!" he fairly exploded the next moment. "A foul lie, told by infamous liars, one and all! And you dirty whelps of Satan—"

"Put up your guns, critter, and I'll show ye what—"

Beebe surlily showed his teeth while speaking, but broke off when Headlong Hugh shook a gun that way before making reply:

"I'll give you all the chance you dare beg for, when the right time comes, you snarling cur. As for now—my first duty is to my pard, and I'm going to look him up. In the lock-up, you say, old fellow?"

Big Sandy nodded assent.

"All right. I know the place. A den for curs instead of quarters for an honest gentleman! But all that can be changed when—Chonesta!"

"All right, boss!"

"If any of these whelps tries to bother, give 'em the best you've got in the shop. Understand?"

"You bet!"

"Now, just one word more to you fellows," flashing eyes over the roughs while adding: "Another time I'll play horse with the pile o' ye to your heart's content, but for now—try to make more trouble while I'm working for my pard, and I'll wipe you off the face o' the earth!"

"You bet! Me too!"

Headlong Hugh moved toward the door without a further glance at the baffled thugs, but Black Dog was on the keen alert, and no move was dared by either.

Then the Cherokee deftly backed out through the open doorway to join his master, the pair striding briskly away through the night.

Here and there they brushed past little knots of citizens, one and all talking in bated tones of the recent tragedy and

its almost certain outcome, but nothing occurred to interrupt their progress until drawing near the rude structure which served as a calaboose for city offenders.

Here was congregated quite a number of people, plainly excited by the cutting affair, and many of whom were talking more or less openly of a necktie party in which Harry Marqueduc should play the most prominent part.

All that the crowd lacked was a leader with courage to take the first step; but that leader was not yet forthcoming, possibly because Seneca Spottsround was standing near the barred door, face pale and stern-set, yet clearly standing up for the prisoner.

Headlong Hugh, his temper at keener edge because of all his ears had caught while coming thus near the threshold, spoke abruptly to Mr. Spottsround, whom he appeared to recognize as one in authority.

The mining magnate gave start and half-smothered ejaculation at sight of the hairy Hercules, but paying that no heed, Headlong Hugh said:

"Look here, old gentleman: I want to get inside yonder!"

"You can't—"

"You bet I just can, and you just bet I will, too!" came the harsh interruption. "You've got my pard in yonder, and—"

"Hugh—oh, Eddlong!" came an eager but husky cry from inside the calaboose, as those tones were recognized by the prisoner.

"All right, pardy! I'm here, and I'm going to—will you open up, I say? Or—open that door, Mr. Spottsround, or I'll shoot my way in!"

Out came a brace of revolvers to match the words, and bold heart though he surely was, Seneca Spottsround shrunk back with face showing still paler than before.

Ugly mutterings came from the crowd, but Eddlong paid them no heed.

"Not you, sir, but the lock," he hastened to assure the mine-owner, with a short, harsh laugh. "Open up, or I'll blow your locks to blazes! I'm going inside, and I'm going right now!"

"If I thought—"

"It's acting, not thinking, old gent. Open up or—that's more like it!" cried Headlong Hugh, as Spottsround reluctantly produced a rusty-looking key from an inner pocket.

Seemingly fancying that such a reckless customer as this would be more amenable to reason inside rather than outside the jail, Spottsround turned key in lock as quickly as might be, then nodded head as invitation for the big sport to cross the threshold.

Dim though the light was right there, it seemed sufficient for such keen eyes, and as though seeing something to take warning by in that unusually pale face, Eddlong spoke with grim decision:

"All right. I'm going in, but—after you is manners, just now!"

A brief hesitation, then Spottsround entered, followed by the sport.

"You stand guard, Black Dog, and don't let 'em play us dirt!" was his adjuration to the faithful Cherokee.

CHAPTER V.

THE SPORT'S LUCKLESS PARD.

"You bet!" quoth Black Dog, as he faced the crowd, back to the door, looking far more the untamed warrior than a graduated from Haskell University.

Evidently the sport held full confidence in this, his henchman, for he gave no further look in that direction, shoving Seneca Spottsround to one side in order to the more fervently greet his luckless pard.

Harry Marqueduc seemed almost too deeply agitated for articulate speech, and there were drops of moisture about his eyes which, in case of a woman, would have been tears, as he felt that hearty grasp of honest hands.

Eddlong saw this; saw that the young fellow was too deeply wrought upon just then for ordinary greetings, so put on his gayest bustle as he gripped hands and cried:

"Well, now, this is a sweet-scented old hostelry you've chosen to welcome a pard in, you delicious young rascal, you! How dare you—if I hadn't been born too mighty good-natured for my own blessing, Hal, you scoundrel, I'd crawl all up your back; like a blessed alacran—yes, I just would, now!"

"I never—you have heard, then?" huskily muttered the prisoner.

"Some infernal nonsense about—pah! What fools say: let a fool give ear to—and that's not my mother's boy! It's all a dirty mistake which can't hold for a minute when people get their reason back again. And so—take a brace, old man! I'll have you out o' this in just two waggles of a sheep's flapper!"

Just then Seneca Spottsround interposed, voice sounding almost as anxious as his face looked by the dim glow of the oil-lamp against the rear wall of the calaboose.

"If he could only explain—can't you tell who did the cutting, lad, since you say you never?"

"Of course he never!"

"Before high heaven, I never harmed poor Miles!" passionately cried the accused, freeing hands from that warm grasp to clasp and hold them above his head, like one calling the powers to bear witness.

"Yet he was stabbed, and that while you were fighting. If not your hand, whose was it?" persisted the mine-owner, gravely.

The Happy-go-lucky Sport gave him an abrupt shove aside, seemingly irritated by that very gravity, then faced his pard, one hand on shoulder, while its mate closely clasped a set of trembling fingers.

"Brace up, old man, and tell me all about it. Of course I know you never struck at a man's back; it isn't in your blood; but since Miles did catch the point, who did it?"

Something in those tones and that presence aided Marqueduc to rally in goodly measure, although he still looked and acted like one half-dazed by some benumbing blow.

Again and again the accused protested his complete innocence, but with it came the assertion of utter ignorance as well.

"He was drunk; not stupidly, you understand, but just enough under the cursed influence to be quarrelsome."

"Or he'd never pick a row with a fellow like you; that goes without saying, Harry."

"I tried my level best to keep out of it. I begged him to go 'way and sleep it off. I even—he struck me, time and again! See!" pushing back his tangled locks to agitatedly tap with forefinger that ugly bruise upon a temple.

"He struck you first, Harry?"

"Yes, yes! I did all that mortal man might do to ease it over, but when he said—he was drunk—fighting drunk!"

"What did he say?" quickly cut in Mr. Spottsround, listening keenly and closely to that broken explanation. "What was it that made you turn upon him in the end?"

"Didn't he tell you?" almost harshly cried the Sport, frowning upon the mine-owner. "If a man should hammer you all over, wouldn't you turn on him, too? Sure! And so—you grappled Harry? You had a wrestle and a dog-fall, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"I knew it! And being fighting drunk, as you say, and feeling that he was getting all the worst of the muss, he picked—why, a blind man could see it all with his eyes shut!"

"Then you know—"

"Of course I know! And so would anybody else know who toted even a modicum of sound sense about with him!"

Know? Why wouldn't I, when it's all so plain that—where were your reasoning powers, Spottsround?"

But the mine-owner shook his head in silent response before saying:

"You're wrong, sir; it wasn't Rockweed's own knife."

"How do you know? Who says so? Of course it was his own knife, and he fell upon it when the lads went down together!" gruffly declared the big Sport, with frown and shake of hairy pow.

A brief silence, broken by Spottsround, speaking slowly, seriously:

"And it was Marqueduc's worse luck!"

"No, no, I never—I didn't—I had no knife with me!"

Seneca Spottsround in silence pointed at the waist of the accused. The empty scabbard hung there at his hip, just where a hand would find it easiest to grasp hilt and draw weapon.

Headlong Hugh gave an ominous growl at this, lips curling back from strong white teeth as he faced the mine-owner to utter:

"Are you trying to knot the rope around his neck? Are you one of his dirty enemies, sir?"

"No, no, Hugh! Only for him I would have been lynched like a sheep-killing cur! Only for him—he is one of my best friends, Eddlong."

"Let that answer your doubts, Mr. Eddlong," gravely spoke Spottsround. "What I want most is to get at the bottom facts in this ugly affair, and in order to do that the truth must be told on all sides. And so I repeat: 'Twas Harry's own sheath-knife which we found sunk to its very hilt in the back of poor Rockweed."

The Sport turned again to his pard, and choking back his emotions as best he might, Marqueduc answered that silent query.

"It may be. It must be so, since he says it. But I never had my knife with me—then! I mislaid it, some way, somewhere; I can't remember now. But this much I feel fairly sure of: Miles never tried to cut me; how could he when we were wrestling? Yet—it surely must have been an accident, somehow!"

Headlong Hugh frowned and shook his pow.

"Such accidents don't happen, pardy. 'Twould split sober reason wide open to make it cover so much, and—What's biting you now, Hal?"

Marqueduc shrunk away, shiveringly.

"You mean—you can think I really did it?"

"Haven't you told me you never cut Rockweed, pard?"

"Yes, but—"

"That settles it, then! You never played Miles dirt, but somebody surely did; and that's just the point I'm going to make clear enough for wise men and idiots to read as they canter, you bet your delicious existence!"

"Oh, if you only will—if you only could, Hugh!"

"I'll do it or bu'st a hame-strap, pardy! I'll find out the whole truth and drag the dirty whelp of Satan to justice if it takes the rest of my life; that's said and sworn to!"

During all this time eager eyes had kept watch without, and curious ears were being strained to their utmost in striving to follow what might be said within the calaboose.

Neither sight nor sound proved sufficient for some of the more turbulent spirits, however, and at this juncture some one raised the ominous cry for a life for a life!

"Hang him! Lynch him! Rush the Injun and snatch the knifer bald-headed!"

Marqueduc straightened up at this, tossing head back and looking more like his natural self for the moment.

Lip curled with fierce scorn ere gloomy despair came to darken that swarthy handsome visage.

"You hear?" he spoke, bitterly.

"Even if you can find out the whole truth, Eddlong, 'twill come too late for my neck!"

The Sport moved a bit closer to the door, speaking sharply to his redskin pard:

"Hold 'em level, Chonesta! Shoot the first fool who tries to crowd you off your guard, and I'll be there with both hands full of sudden death!"

"You bet!" assured Black Dog, cheerfully. "I'll give 'em little old h—l in big chunks; that's so!"

Headlong Hugh turned back to his luckless pard, gripping both hands in his as he spoke again:

"Brace up, old man. You'll never stretch hemp for another's crime, so don't you think it, even for a minute. I'll see you safely out o' this nasty hobble, and we'll both tail on to the rope that yanks poor Rockweed's assassin clean into eternity!"

"If it hadn't been his knife!" muttered Spottsround.

"That comes in with the rest of the day's work. I'll get it all straightened out in good time, never you worry, sir. And now, try to make it just a bit more clear, pardy. Tell us just how the row started, and just what it was all about."

Even now that seemed no easy task for Marqueduc, and his voice faltered more than once ere he could get his explanation fairly under headway. But, encouraged by Eddlong, he finally got at the kernel.

That came in lowered tones, which could be understood only by those three, for in spite of the imminent peril which menaced his very life, Harry could not bring himself to forget or ignore the respect due a lady.

He spoke of the taunts and hints let fall by his partner in the Homestake Mine, growing angry and hot as he dwelt upon that tender point.

"You know he lied while saying it, sir!" he appealed to Mr. Spottsround. "You know Milly was and is true as steel! You know that she loved me alone, even as she promised to marry me! Don't you, now?"

Instead of making prompt acknowledgment as Harry plainly expected, Seneca Spottsround shrunk back a bit, like one painfully embarrassed, or one reluctant to tell all he might.

Just then an interruption came from without, which was welcomed by at least one of that trio.

"I say, boss!" called a gruff voice through the heavily barred window. "You're wanted by Miles Rockweed over to the hotel!"

"What! Then he is not—he's still living?" demanded the capitalist, stepping toward the door, while looking at the face by the window.

"Yes, but—waal, now, he's mighty bad off, an' ef ye don't make a holy hurry of it I wouldn't give a tinker's dam fer yer chainces o' seein' him this side o' 'tarnity; no I wouldn't now!"

"I'll go—I'll come at once!"

But a strong hand checked his movement, and he turned with a frown to see Headlong Hugh shake head and hear him speak:

"Don't be in such a mighty rush, pardner. I like your company too well to take the dirty shake like this."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I reckon if Rockweed can see one, he can stand a couple, so—good-night to ye, pardy!" turning a smiling visage toward Marqueduc and reaching back a cordial hand for grip and shake.

"You're going, Hugh? You're not—must you go?"

"It's on your business, pardy, so take a good brace and make up your mind to this blessed truth: the right is bound to come out on top o' the heap, and we'll both play horse together ages after the real assassin has fattened the worms."

"Unless they lynch me, out o' hand!" with a sickly laugh. "With you two true friends gone, what protection have I?"

CHAPTER VI.

A PHYSICIAN ON GUARD.

"Oh, you're too low down in the mouth by far, pardy," briskly assured the Happy-go-lucky Sport, with a light laugh, which seemed entirely free from care or uneasiness for the future. "Where we go, a round score of just as honest and honorable men stop behind. And—wait a bit, pardy!"

Seneca Spottsround was opening the door, and as it swung inward to grant them exit, he raised his voice higher, speaking to the crowd in general.

"You understand, gentlemen, I'm going bail for Henry Marqueduc. I swear that he is guiltless of harming Miles Rockweed, and my life stands pledged to not only prove as much, but to fetch the real knifer to the gallows."

A few scattering cheers greeted this emphatic announcement, but there were less agreeable sounds coming from more quarters than one at the same time.

Ignoring these, Headlong Hugh spoke on:

"Having given you one and all this honest pledge, I'll show you the other side of the document. I know what a few dirty whelps can bring to pass if they set their minds upon it, but if there is any foul play attempted this night; if harm is offered my pard in here before we have a fair chance to show his complete innocence, I'll kill the leaders if I go down while doing so!"

Seneca Spottsround likewise begged all concerned to withdraw, and to take no decided move that night, hoping, as he believed, that Marqueduc could still be proven innocent of attempted murder.

Bidding Black Dog keep guard over the jail and its occupant until he could go and come, Headlong Hugh gave Harry a final word of encouragement, then hurried away through the night in company with Seneca Spottsround, their immediate destination being the hotel to which unfortunate Miles Rockweed had been conveyed.

But few words were spoken during that brief tramp, for each man had an abundance of food for sober thought.

Now that the eyes of his young pard could no longer read the change of his countenance, Hugh Eddlong looked grave enough, for his mind was sorely puzzled to account for that ugly happening.

Not that he would for an instant doubt his friend. He would as quickly believe himself guilty of assassination. But how was that innocence to be made manifest?

Only for that luckless weapon!

Whose hand had dealt the fatal stroke? How could it have been done without either man's knowledge? Even though locked in fierce wrestle, it seemed past all probability that such a blow could be administered and he who gave it escape recognition by one or the other adversary.

Yet, granting Harry's innocence, that must have been the case. For, surely, Rockweed would not be carrying his partner's knife in addition to his own? Or, if so, was it likely that he would have drawn that to accidentally fall upon, instead of his own tool?

Such perplexing thoughts kept the Sport's brain fairly busy until the hotel was reached and they stood near the head of the stairs where was located the chamber assigned to the wounded miner.

Before a hand could fairly rap at that barrier, it swung silently open and the tall form of Dr. Branscombe emerged, a frown upon his face, as he seemed to recognize their purpose without words.

"He's still alive, doctor?" asked Spottsround in lowered tones to suit the occasion.

"Alive, but little more. What do you want?"

"Admittance, of course. Rockweed sent for me, and I wish to—"

But the physician on guard shook his head peremptorily.

"You cannot enter, Mr. Spottsround." "But, he sent word for me to come; that he wished to see me at once," urged the mine-owner and capitalist.

"Can't help it, sir. Mr. Rockweed is my patient, and I feel in duty bound to serve him to the full extent of my ability. He is far too low for conversation, and so—you cannot enter!"

Spottsround fell back like one abashed at this, but Headlong Hugh was not so readily repulsed, and that cold, stiff, forbidding manner had no particular terror for him.

Stepping more to the front as Seneca fell back on silent toes, he spoke in low but earnest tones:

"You'd be all right under ordinary occasions, sir, but this doesn't happen to be such. Rockweed sent for Mr. Spottsround—"

"I am not deaf, sir," with a stiff bow.

"Don't try to be deaf to reason, then," retorted the Sport with a brief show of his teeth. "Although his physician, you are hardly Mr. Rockwood's father confessor, I imagine?"

"Possibly not, but neither are you."

"You can't prove it. I want in—"

"I've already said that you cannot enter. Surely that is plain enough language, sir?"

"Come, come, now!" with growing impatience. "This may be all right under ordinary circumstances, but not right now Rockweed can tell how he came by his hurt, and so hinder an innocent neck from stretching hemp. That's why I'm begging for you—"

"What I'm constrained as a physician in charge to deny, sir."

"But he sent for Spottsround, and you have no right to deny him admittance when—"

"Surely Mr. Spottsround is able to speak for himself? Since he has taken my answer as final, why need you kick? So—good-night to you, sir!" curtly spoke the man of medicine, opening and slipping through the door, closing it just as deftly in the face of the sport.

Eddlong was taken completely by surprise, for as he glanced around at those words, he found himself alone; Seneca Spottsround had vanished without sound or word!

And yet that feat was easily enough accomplished.

As stated, the chamber door was close to the head of the narrow flight of stairs, and doubtless knowing from past experience that Dr. Branscombe could not be moved from a stand once taken, the capitalist had but to slip back a pace or two, then descend to the lower floor and pass out beneath the stairs.

That was precisely what Seneca Spottsround did do, and before his absence was so much as suspected by the deeply interested sport, he was fairly clear of the hotel and striding along through the uncertain moonlight at a rapid rate.

There was naught of hesitation or of irresolution to be noted in his movements, and Spottsround evidently had some particular destination in view from the start.

It did not take him long to reach that goal, for presently his pace slackened and he cast a slow, sweeping glance around like one dreading espial.

Failing to detect aught which might confirm that dread, Spottsround strode on a few paces further, pausing in front of a rude and small frame building, at the rough door of which he rapped after a peculiar fashion.

Silence. A brief pause, then another series of taps with knuckles, and the plank barrier swung open a couple of feet, while a rough tone made itself heard:

"Come in, can't you, boss? Nobody's looking, I don't reckon?"

Spottsround slipped through the opening and as rapidly shut the door back of himself before speaking in turn.

"That's all right, Beebe, but I'm past taking any off-chances, you want to un-

derstand. And this night is—pah! I've got a bad taste in my mouth already!"

Bulldog Beebe gave a nondescript sound which could hardly be interpreted, moving back to where a couple of chairs stood by a rude table supporting a guttering candle.

Dropping into the nearest seat, he waved a huge paw toward the other in speechless invitation for his guest to be seated as well.

Spottsround accepted that invitation, giving a long breath as he tossed aside his hat, brushing one long-fingered white hand over his damp temples as he leaned back in his chair.

Bulldog Ben leaned forward, elbows on table and massive jaws clasped by his big hands, little eyes twinkling evilly as they scanned that face, now looking remarkably pale, in spite of the mask of iron-gray beard with which it was supplied by nature.

"Well, what is it, Beebe?" asked Spottsround, after a bit of waiting.

"I was just wondering, boss," slowly answered the ex-pugilist.

"What about, pray?"

"This: how did you manage to turn that little trick, anyway, Spottsround?" abruptly asked Beebe, leaning still further across the table in his undisguised interest.

Before an answer could be given to that decidedly leading question, a sound from just without the door drew both pair of eyes swiftly that way; and then came a hurried rap, followed instantly by lifting latch and opening barrier.

Bulldog Beebe half-rose from his chair with a snarl of angry surprise, but as quickly dropped back again on recognizing the fellow who made such an unceremonious entrance.

"Hellow, Quinn! You, is it? But what in blazes are you doing with that mop of hair on the mug o' you, man alive?"

The intruder was looking at mine-owner rather than pugilist, and he gave a low, odd-pitched chuckle as one hand went up to pluck from his face the false beard and mustache which he had worn at entrance.

Looking at this affair for an instant, still with face on the broad grin, as though he found something particularly humorous in that connection, Owen Quinn leaned back against the closed door, growing fairly sober of face as he gave a nod toward the capitalist, then slowly extended his right hand that way before speaking.

"What are you trying to get through you, anyway, Irish?" harshly demanded Bulldog Ben, frowning blackly.

"Faith, sor," with a nod which clearly indicated Seneca Spottsround, "maybe 'tis you, sor, can give me the information, thin? Hayre's the blessed pelt, sure, an' now—whayre's the mon that wore it, bedad?"

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADOW OF COMING EVENTS.

These words were plainly addressed to Seneca Spottsround, and Owen Quinn leaned forward with keen interest aglow in his eyes, shaking the mass of hair as he did so.

Bulldog Ben gave another slight start, and his gaze as well became riveted upon the pale face of the mine-owner of whose talents Hardpan was so proud.

Mr. Spottsround showed surprise plainly enough, but if any other emotion stirred within breast or brain, naught in his countenance betrayed the fact.

"A—what is it you've got there, Quinn?" he asked, after a brief pause for inspection. "Looks like—what is it, anyway?"

"Will ye look at this, thin, begorra!"

Owen clapped the hair upon his face, awkwardly enough, yet in such fashion none who saw could well doubt what it was intended for.

Vividly red as to hue, coarse as to texture, unkempt and frowsy the whole,

yet a more than fair disguise for one who wished to conceal his identity for any particular purpose.

"A false beard; why are you wearing it, Quinn?" demanded the capitalist, the surprise which showed in face entering tones as well.

The Irishman gave another odd chuckle, removing the disguise as he came forward, dropping it upon the table between the two men.

"Did ye never see the like o' that, thin, sor?"

Spottsround touched the hairy mass with tip of forefinger, much as though he suspected contagion might lurk therein. He shook his head as he glanced up to meet those half-mocking, half-menacing eyes.

"Never this to my knowledge. Why? What do you mean, Owen?"

"An' butther wouldn't milt in the gob o' him be the looks, faith!"

Quinn turned abruptly away from the table, fetching a third chair from the rear of the room, seating himself nigh the other men, legs extended, hands in pockets, chin touching chest as his body took a sharp angle.

Seneca Spottsround looked at the muscular Irishman for a few seconds in silence, then turned with a shoulder-shrug toward his host, drily speaking:

"Too much bad whisky, don't you reckon, Beebe?"

Bulldog Ben shook his head, warily.

"Something better or worse than that, boss. Owen isn't—what are you trying to get through you, anyway, Quinn?"

"Do ye see that same, then?" demanded the Irishman, losing something of the brogue with which he had sprinkled his talk before. "What is it, gentlemen?"

"We can see what 'tis easy enough. What does it mean?"

"Well, I'll tell ye just that, faith," still keenly watching the capitalist with veiled interest. "It's something left behind be the felly that stobbed Miles Rockweed, sure!"

"What!" ejaculated Spottsround, picking up the manufactured hair with quickened interest at these words.

"Sure!"

"How do you know? Where'd you find it, Owen?" asked Beebe.

"That's the story I'll be afther telling ye av ye'll howld yer whisht a wee minute or so, faith," declared the Patlander, straightening up in his chair and leaning forward for greater comfort.

"Out with it, then!"

"Well, thin, 'twas when I saw there was mighty little show for a necktie party, wid Harry Marqueduc to lade the procission, thin, that I tuck a bit av a wandher over the way where that same cuttin' scrape kem off, ye understand?"

"And there you found—this?" asked Spottsround.

"Thru for you, sor? There I found this, like he who hed good use for that same wan time, hed flung it away afther his nasty work was done to his liking; yes!"

Again the two men examined the article. Again the mine-owner shook his head like one thoroughly puzzled to account for it all.

His companions interchanged covert glances. Bulldog Ben nodded his head, and Quinn spoke on in brisker tones.

"Niver mind just why I tuck the fancy to hev a squint in that same quarther, sor. I had, faith, an' this was what I found!"

"From which you deduce—"

"Isn't it plain enough, faith? Sure, the felly who cut Miles—"

"Wait, please," spoke Spottsround, leaning far enough that way to tap the Irishman's nearest arm with long forefinger. "I hold, with poor Miles himself, that Harry Marqueduc did the cutting."

"And this thing?" demanded Quinn, touching the disguise.

"Wait, please," quietly repeated the capitalist, settling back in his chair like

one who had no little to offer. "Whether that cuts any figure in this particular case depends—let me get at it in regular order, though."

"Go ahead, boss. We're all ears open to ye," declared Bulldog Ben, shoving forth a huge brogan to give his mate a warning kick beneath the table.

Seneca Spottsround paid no attention to this bit of byplay, although it could hardly have escaped his notice. His face was grave and serious, his tones pitched to correspond.

"You haven't forgotten what a peculiar contract those two hot-heads entered into when first convinced that they had struck pay-rock in the Homestake?"

"Your telling it over can't do any hurt, boss. Go on."

"That contract, in brief, ran like this: The Homestake was held by Marqueduc and Rockweed in equal shares. Neither was to sell out without the full and free consent of his partner, and in case one or other died while they were still in possession, his whole share in the mining property was to fall to the survivor, any will or wish to the contrary notwithstanding."

"The craziest idee I ever run up against, too!" declared Beebe.

"I'd take it for a perlite invitation to lift me pelt, faith!"

Seneca Spottsround smiled and nodded at each speaker in turn, but he had not quite finished to his fancy.

"Something on that order, I must admit, lads," was his smooth continuation a moment later. "Let me shed a bit more light over the matter, please."

"Go on, boss."

"Well, this is the point I wish to particularly impress upon your minds, my good friends. If Miles Rockweed should die first—"

"Isn't he croaked, thin, sor?"

"Not yet. I've just come from there, you understand? And so—let me finish what I started to say, please."

"You button up, Irish, or I'll pin yer thick lips together with a toothpick like the one Miles caught atwixt his shoulders!"

"Careful, lads. No rowing, please. There's a heap sight better employment for all hands this blessed night, if you'll only take the same view of the matter I do. So—listen, now!"

"Bearing in mind what I've already said, this is just the way matters stand right now. If Rockweed dies first, Marqueduc is left his heir, and so comes into full and undisputed possession of the Homestake; a fortune big enough to divide amongst a dozen, yet leave them one and all well-off for life!"

"That's no lie, either!"

"If so, who would be Marqueduc's heir if he was to hang?"

"Well, sir, there's the girl—"

"Stop!" sharply interrupted Spottsround, with uprising hand and gathering brows. "Please leave my ward out of the discussion, Beebe. As for the rest, say the mob should lynch Harry first, that would leave Miles sole heir to the Homestake property, wouldn't it?"

"Glory to the saints!"

"Sure thing! And then you would—eh?"

Seneca Spottsround leaned back in his chair, smiling blandly as his keen eyes passed from face to face, taking note of their workings.

Vastly different he looked from the honest citizen who so boldly stood up in defence of life and honor but a brief hour earlier that eventful night.

Then a man to be proud of; now a cunning schemer whose heart was black as his face was white!

"And when poor Miles croaked (as he surely must, and that before another sunrise comes to Hardpan) his last, what would be the result?"

"You're meaning something, sor?"

"Of course, and that something is rich enough for the most cultivated taste, too! I'm meaning just this, gentlemen!"

"Should good luck have it that Mar-

queduc hops the twig before Miles Rockweed dies of his hurt, no matter by whose hand administered, everything falls to the poor rascal, according to the contract. And then—"

"Where do we come in at, boss?"

"That's the main quistion, faith!"

"I'm working 'round to that, lads. When Miles dies, as he can't help but do with such an ugly hurt, there'll be mighty rich pickings for us all; don't you see?"

"Not so mighty clear, yit, sir."

"You're terribly dull of comprehension all at once, Beebe; but if you can't take hint without a kick, right here you have the rest of it."

"All Hardpan knows that both pards have been mighty intimate at my place, but even Hardpan can't swear as to all that may or may not have passed between myself and the owners of the Homestake. And so, with both men well out of the way, what's to hinder my producing a regular bill of sale transferring that property to me?"

"You mean—have you bought it, boss?"

"Well, how could I produce such a document if it didn't come to me in regular course?" coolly asked the capitalist, showing teeth in a brief-lived smile.

"From Miles Rockweed, is it, sor?" asked Owen Quinn, slowly, eyes all aglow as they scanned that face, one big hand thoughtfully rubbing his angular chin the while.

"Of course. 'Twould be of little service with any other name as seller, don't you reckon? For, of course, Miles will outlive his pard."

The two men shifted uneasily in their chairs, interchanging glances which contained more doubt than confidence.

Then Bulldog Ben spoke for both himself and pard:

"Well, sir, it's not so mighty hard to see how all that might benefit you, but when it comes down to others: where do we come in at, boss?"

Now it seemed Spottsround's time to hesitate and search with keen eyes. From face to face, then back again. Then, in low but distinct tones he let his mask fall still further.

"Of course there is a certain amount of risk to be run, lads. You couldn't in reason expect to make any big winning without staking something on your own side; now, could you?"

"Go on, boss. Say it out flat-footed, please."

"That's right, sor! The whole thing, faith!"

"Well, then, this is about the way I'm regarding the matter, my good fellows," deliberately went on the schemer. "I'll see that the finer work comes out exactly as we might wish, but of course no single man can do the whole job. You must do your full share, don't you see?"

"How, do it?"

"Something like this, then. Of course you haven't forgotten how I stood up for Harry Marqueduc a bit ago; how I fought back the idea of lynch-law taking a hand in before he'd had a fair trial?"

"Of course I'm still holding to the same notion. I hate the bare idea of hanging a fellow-being without long delay and full trial, and so—I'll bet each one of you fellows a cool thousand dollars that Harry Marqueduc doesn't pull hemp before daylight!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SENECA SPOTTSROUND SHOWS HIS HAND.

Smiling as blandly as one might who had not just let fall a truly diabolical sentiment, the capitalist of Hardpan leaned back in his rude chair, twiddling his long, slender fingers in front of his breast as he glanced from face to face before him.

Thorough-paced villains though they assuredly were, neither Bulldog Ben Beebe nor Owen Quinn were swift to

catch the cue, thinly though that had been disguised.

Seeing this much, Mr. Spottsround spoke further:

"Or, if you call that too brief notice, I'll amend my proposition. I bet you a cool thousand each that Harry Marqueduc doesn't hang, through mob or by law, before this hour to-morrow!"

The ex-pugilist flung forth a hand in irritated gesture.

"Where would the like o' us get such a pile to bet, I want to know?"

"Your word is good as your bond with me, gentlemen," smoothly declared the capitalist. "With the odds so heavily in my favor—for I flatter myself all Hardpan couldn't furnish a mob to fly in the face of my wishes as I have already expressed them—"

"Augh! come out like a man, can't you?" surlily growled the prize-fighter, striking fist upon table with a force which caused the guttering candle to jump and dance, in company with its holder. "Say it in plain American, can't you, boss?"

Spottsround flashed a swift look about that rude interior, as though to make sure no other ears could catch his words, then leaned forward to plant elbows on table and speak coolly, clearly:

"Since you must have every syllable spelled out in full, open your ears and let once telling serve for all time!"

"Miles Rockweed has caught his last sickness. He may possibly pull through this night, but he can't outlive to-morrow. He must outlive Harry Marqueduc, if only by an hour!"

"Make it show us winners, boss, if you know how."

"All right. Set the gang to work and have them lynch Marqueduc, then I'll be ready with the papers when Rockweed croaks. And I'll pay each one of you fellows a cool thousand chucks if that lynching comes off in good time. Understand?"

"Good enough!" grunted Bulldog Ben. "Good a-plenty far as it goes, but that isn't quite far enough, you see?"

"How so? A single word, almost, will set the crowd howling for a necktie party!"

"That's right, too, but you forget—the sport!"

"The—whom?"

"Headlong Hugh he calls himself, with a wry grimace and a half-smothered curse at the memory thus revived. "He's a devil on ten wheels when he gets started, and he's dead stuck on Marqueduc. You know that."

"Well, he's but a man, all told."

"A mighty tough nut to crack, all the same. And, worse luck! he's got the bunch o' us down in his books for a mighty black mark already."

"How so? I don't understand, Beebe."

Bulldog Ben gave a tolerably impartial account of their adventure with the Happy-go-lucky Sport, backed up by the redskinned delegate from Haskell Institute.

Seneca Spottsround frowned a bit as he listened, but then his brows cleared once more and he was ready with an answer when the ex-pugilist ceased speaking.

"Well, of course we oughtn't to expect to pick up a big fortune without taking some slight chances. I know Eddlong, and he's pretty much all you say for the fellow."

"And that red devil isn't a slouch, d'ye mind, now!" contributed Owen Quinn. "Wid his big goon—ugh!"

"That big gun will help him precious little when it comes to a snug rap on the scone from behind," coolly declared the capitalist. "As for the sport—wait a bit."

Producing a notebook and pencil from an inner pocket, he tore out a blank leaf, then wrote rapidly for a few seconds before speaking further. Returning book and pencil to his breast, Spottsround added:

"Fetch or send me this note, waiting until you find me in company with Edd-

long. Make sure you deliver it when none others are nigh enough to take note of the fact, and let the sport see how it comes to me."

"If he should see too much, though?"

"He'll scarcely spread his knowledge abroad, don't you worry," with a low significant chuckle, which spoke ever plainer than his words. "But you can easily guard against that. Muffle up Wear this hairy contrivance, for this matter," touching the false beard, which still lay upon the table between them.

"All right, boss. That's easy enough come to think it over. But," and Bulldog Ben eyed that scrap of paper curiously "what've you written there, if it's a fair question?"

"I'll read it off to you, lads. Just this much: 'I know who cut Miles Rockweed Fetch a hundred chucks to the old Blow out workings, and I'll blow the gaff.'"

"They hain't no name signed to it boss?"

"Of course not."

"It don't sound jest—what if the sport don't bite, though?"

"Don't you worry about that part o' the job, Beebe. I'll see that Eddlong takes the bait clear down to where he lives."

The two lesser knaves looked at each other for a brief space, then Owen Quinn ventured:

"Av he does bite, sor? What thin?"

Seneca Spottsround left the decoy note lying on the table, leaning back in his chair once more to indulge in a low, sarcastic chuckle before making answer to this query.

"That belongs to your part of the job lads. I'll see that the sport goes from town to the rendezvous all right enough I'll make it come so that he'll never hold a doubt as to that note being just what it looks on the face of it."

"After I've drawn him out yonder though, you fellows must do the rest, if you wish to earn your thousand."

"That was for running Marqueduc up a tree, wasn't it?"

"And you say that can't be done so long as Eddlong is to the fore," crisply retorted the capitalist. "If you'd rather down him while rushing the rope—"

"No, no; it'll come easier the other way, I reckon."

"And safer by far. But you must fully understand one thing: there mustn't be any slip-up. He must stay right there! If he should get back to town before the lynching—well, that might never come off!"

Bulldog Ben frowned darkly as he pinched lips between thumb and fore finger, staring at vacancy for a few moments. Evidently his sluggish brain was slowly shaping the vile plot which was thus shadowed forth.

Presently he gave a long breath, nodding vigorously as he brought a heavy fist down upon the table.

"All right, boss! It's a whack, and we'll claim your thousands; eh, Owen?"

"Sure an' I've been good an' riddy this hour gone by," coolly declared the Irishman. "I'll give ye the note, sor, an' devil a wan o' him will iver know me, faith!"

At this Seneca Spottsround rose from his chair and crossed over to where his hat was lying, speaking further as he came erect once more.

"All right. Settle the details amongst you, Beebe, only make clean work of it all. A couple of you ought to be enough out yonder, as I'll lead the sport blindfold into the trap. The rest can turn the trick at the calaboose. Only—clean work of it all, remember!"

Both roughs gave assurance that such should be the case, then Mr. Spottsround blew out the candle before opening the door.

"No use in calling attention to our little seance, lads, you understand?" was his chuckling remark; then he crossed the threshold and hastened away to perform his part in that evil conspiracy.

As a matter of course, his first thought was to rejoin the sport whom he had engaged to lure into a death-trap, and just as naturally he went first to where he had last seen the Hercules.

Spottsround failed to find Eddlong at the hotel, but his time was not entirely wasted, since he contrived to catch a few words with Dr. Branscombe, from whose lips he learned an important fact.

"He is still alive, sir, and from all appearances he will live to see another day dawn. Provided, of course, that his present quiet is not disturbed."

"Will he not pull through entirely, then?" solicitously queried the benevolent mine-owner, face as full of anxiety as were his tones.

The doctor shook his head decidedly.

"Impossible, sir! Only a truly marvelous constitution has enabled him to cling to life thus far. He is gradually weakening, and all the drugs and medical skill in America couldn't prolong that life four-and-twenty hours longer!"

Spottsround properly expressed his deep regrets at this death-knell in which he so firmly believed, then withdrew after again offering all the aid which lay within his means.

Leaving the hotel, Mr. Spottsround turned in the direction of the jail, feeling fairly confident that he would be more successful in that quarter; a belief which was speedily justified.

The Happy-go-lucky Sport had carried to Marqueduc the welcome tidings that Miles Rockweed was still far from being a corpse, and in his honest efforts to cheer that luckless pard up, no doubt Eddlong stretched the truth a trifle.

Watching his chance, Seneca Spottsround gave the sport a signal which was promptly answered in person, and after moving well away from the still excited crowd which lingered nigh the calaboose, the mine-owner excused himself by telling what he had gleaned from Dr. Branscombe.

While thus engaged the arch-schemer caught sight of a bearded man skulking nearer, and a few seconds later Owen Quinn, in disguise, handed him the decoy-note, gruffly muttering ere he vanished amid the gloom:

"To save pore Marqueduc—take it!"

CHAPTER IX.

FACING THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE.

Little by little Harry Marqueduc was rallying from the stupefying blow which a cruel fate had dealt him, and though his wits were still far from being as keen and clear as usual, a gleam of light seemed to be working through those ugly storm-clouds.

Something of this change was no doubt due to the coming of his old-time friend and companion, Hugh Eddlong, whose cheery tones and bold assertions were still echoing in his ears.

Then, too, a lull had come over the excited crowd. With violent passions spent in good part, that crowd had gradually dissolved and melted away, until but remnant lingered in the immediate vicinity of the jail.

Now and then a brutal cry was to be heard, but as a rule those savage cries for human blood had died away into nothingness.

The armed guard, which had been chosen mainly by Seneca Spottsround were still on duty in front of the calaboose, although even they seemed to be growing careless, as though feeling their office a mere sinecure.

Once or twice, as he peered through that heavily-barred window, Harry Marqueduc caught (or so fancied) a glimpse of Chonesta, the Cherokee, with his Winchester; but Black Dog was far too shrewd to make his presence obtrusive in the absence of the Happy-go-lucky Sport.

Retreating to the rear of his rude prison, Marqueduc seated himself upon the stool which had been provided for that purpose, elbows on knees and face

sunken in joined palms, as he brooded bitterly over the recent past.

Try as he might, the poor fellow could not make out how that fatal wound had been inflicted.

He knew that his hand had not dealt the blow. He knew that, though the deadly weapon itself may have belonged to him, as claimed, the blade had not been upon his person when that unfortunate encounter began.

Where he had mislaid the knife, or how long since he had lost it, was beyond his powers of recalling, as yet. All he knew was just that: no knife had been in his belt, no such blow was dealt by hand of his!

Was it an accident?

Had poor Miles found and, recognizing the weapon, kept it for the rightful owner? And then, maddened by the vile poison he had swallowed, had he drawn that blade instead of his own, to fall upon it the next moment?

Unlikely as all this seemed, Marqueduc could not find any more plausible interpretation for that ugly mystery. For, surely, none other could have come nigh enough to drive that weapon so surely home, yet come and go unseen and unheard by them both?

How else could it have happened?

And then, striving his level best to clear his whirling brain in order to solve the black enigma, Harry Marqueduc thought of first one and then another, searching memory for an enemy ruthless enough to have planned a double assassination.

For that was what it all would amount to; poor Miles to perish by the blade, himself following closely after—by the hangman's noose!

Marqueduc gave an audible groan at this hideous reflection, shivering like one afflicted by an ague-fit. And yet he was far from being a physical coward.

It was bad and bitter enough to know that grim death was hovering over his head, but to come in that shameful shape was far worse! Anything but that! Anything rather than pass from life with such a hideously loathsome badge as that!

With an almost fierce effort the accused, once again brought his emotions under control, thinking—thinking—striving to catch and fasten down the ugly truth.

"Who did it? Who hates us both bitterly enough to—I wonder if—could it be either of—of—"

His muscles tightened as Harry Marqueduc came to this point. Could it be possible that either Spottsround, father or son, had taken advantage of that unfortunate quarrel to thus deal a doubly-edged blow at them, the partners of the Homestake?

Again and again the young man mentally vowed that it could not be: that he surely was losing what little store of wits the awful blow had left him; and still his suspicions would persist in centering about those two: Seneca Spottsround and his son, Jasper!

He recalled how eager the capitalist had been in his efforts to purchase the Homestake, or at least a share in the mine, since the grand vein had been fairly developed.

Going further back, he remembered how bitterly Mr. Spottsround opposed his suit for the hand of Milly Fickeson, the mine-owner's ward.

That was before the Homestake was known as anything better than a fair prospect, and while both pards had a tough fight to make their way in this world; more than once going to their rude bunks with hollow stomachs through pure lack of necessary food!

And then—Milly was rich in her own right! And Jasper—ugh!

Red-haired, freckle-faced, wide-lipped, an ungainly scion from the family tree, Jasper Spottsround had, not so many months gone by, tried all he knew to "cut him out," not a little to the fair Milly's annoyance.

True, Jasper had passed it all off as but

a careless jest, turning elsewhere as he laughingly avowed; but—

"I know the old man would rather have it come that way, and while Polly Gannett is all right in her way, Milly is—"

So far the prisoner's thoughts had carried him, that vague suspicion gaining strength and coherency with each passing minute; but now a low-pitched voice came to Marqueduc's ears, causing him to lift head and glance quickly in that direction.

Instinct told him the sound came from the barred window, and as his eyes turned that way, Harry caught sight of a face pressed close to the bars from without; a face which drew a low, almost fierce cry from his lips as he started to his feet.

By the dim rays of the oil-lamp he recognized the man who now gave an eager nod; one of the twain with whose possible guilt his brain had been so busy but a brief while before.

"You, is it, Jasper Spottsround?" he exclaimed, almost unwittingly moving that way.

"Hist! not too loud, old man!" swiftly warned the one without, head partly turning, as though fearing something yonder in the night-gloom. "Come this way; closer, Harry!"

"What do you want with me, Spottsround?"

Somehow that appearance, just when his suspicions were centering in that very quarter, seemed to confirm his ugly doubts, and 'twas with a very forbidding frown that Marqueduc drew nearer that window.

Possibly the dim light hindered Jasper from noting this expression, or he may have been too strongly excited himself to give it proper interpretation; be that as it may, he spoke as though his dearest wish just then was to aid and protect this wrongfully imprisoned friend.

"Closer, lad! No saying how long those fellows will let me talk, but while I am, let—brace up, Harry! You're worth a dozen dead men yet, and we'll fight for your life as long as there's a spark of hope left!"

"What do you want with me, Jasper Spottsround?"

"I know what'd suit me best: to have you out of that in a holy hurry, old man! I know—and you've just got to make a break, too!"

"Make a break?" echoed the prisoner.

"That's right! I say, Harry?"

"Go on, can't you?"

Young Spottsround flashed an uneasy look to his rear, like one who dreads being overheard by less friendly ears, then pressed a bit closer to those rusty bars, speaking in a husky whisper:

"I hate to say it—hate like sin to have to say it, lad! But the honest fact is—just like this: There's fresh trouble brewing, and if we can't contrive to foolish 'em some way, you'll sup sorrow, sure!"

In spite of those haunting suspicions this real or apparent earnestness on his behalf had its effect upon Marqueduc, and as he just then caught a distant yell to remind him of the fate which had once before seemed fairly claiming him, he spoke in altered tones:

"What sort of trouble, Jasper? What do you mean?"

As though in answer to that very question, some ruffian cried from out the night:

"Lynch him! The rope for Harry Marqueduc!"

"You hear that, don't you, lad?" swiftly muttered Spottsround, with another uneasy glance over his shoulder. "The devil's abroad this night, and there's only one way for you to cheat the rope; make a break for your life and lie low under snug cover until this nasty storm can blow over your head!"

"Make a break; how can I do that?"

"Will you, then?" with increased eagerness, his eyes glowing as though

backed by living fire. "Say you will, Harry, and I'll make an opening if it takes a leg off!"

Surely Jasper Spottsround was in deep earnest? And yet, curiously enough, that very eagerness went far toward defeating his purpose, since it served to stir afresh those ugly suspicions in Marqueduc's brain.

"Show me how, first," he said, coldly.

"Good! I'll come back, as though with a message from Rockweed. I'll demand admittance, and then you'll make a break past me. I'll help, while seeming to hinder, and then—"

His eager speech was cut short by a harsh laugh, from which he shrunk as from an actual blow in the face.

"Oh, you're too infernally kind, Spottsround!" rudely declared Harry.

"I don't—what do you mean by that, Marqueduc?"

"What do I mean? Just this, Jasper Spottsround: If die I must, I'll perish like a white man, not like a runaway assassin! I'll never give you or your pals a fair chance to damn me all over, as I feel—"

"Are you gone crazy, man alive?"

"Nor turned fool, please heaven!" came the swift retort.

"Then why do you—hark!" as ominous sounds rose upon the night air, surely drawing nigher that point.

Loud yells and shouts were mingled with savage speech; words and even sentences coming to their ears as they listened, telling plainly of lawless violence, of lynch-law where at least one other life was to pay dire forfeit!

Jasper Spottsround gave a husky cry as of despair, but even yet he persisted, begging Marqueduc to catch at the last frail hope for life.

Then a stern warning came from those left as guardians over the accused, bidding Jasper rack out o' that, under dire penalty.

"I hoped to help—too late for that, but—all eyes open, old man!" hurriedly spoke the young fellow, as he drew away, lest worse might follow insubordination just then.

Those parting words made scant impression upon Marqueduc, just then, for those ugly sounds more nearly filled the air, and a red glow made itself visible from where he stood, close to that barred window.

He saw a number of rough-garbed men rushing that way with blazing torches, and knowing now that the crisis had come, he shrunk back from the window, pale as death and shivering violently.

Yet he listened with painfully strained ears to what followed; to those rushing, trampling feet, those savage yells and curses and awful threats. And then, like one in a waking dream, he knew that the blood-thirsty mob was at the jail itself, hustling away the armed guard; and he caught his breath with a gasp as he failed to hear even one shot fired in his defense!

Then the door was violently dashed open, to admit a number of armed men, the foremost of whom bore a rope ready noosed for its victim.

Given courage to meet his impending doom like a man, Harry Marqueduc stood with folded arms and proudly erect form, to hear the harsh command:

"Ready, critter! Rockweed's dead an' hyar's your last sickness!"

CHAPTER X.

HEADLONG HUGH TAKES THE BAIT.

Seneca Spottsround played his part to perfection, as might have been expected, seeing how thoroughly he was prepared for that happening.

While making sure the Happy-go-lucky Sport saw how that note came into his possession, he took pains to step quickly in such manner as to shield the disguised messenger for the instant, giving an ejaculation of admirably counterfeited surprise.

"To save—I don't—who was it, any—"

way?" the capitalist spluttered, wheeling to stare in the direction taken by that muffled shape.

There was naught to be learned from that quarter, however. The fellow had vanished from their sight, and even if either man had taken such thought, 'twould have been worse than useless to run after him.

"What is it? What'd he give you?" eagerly demanded the sport, reaching forth a hand to take possession of that decoy note.

"I don't—what could he have meant, anyway?" asked Spottsround, bewilderedly, following as Eddlong hurried toward the nearest light. "He said something about saving poor Marqueduc, but—eh?"

The sport paused close to a saloon window, bending head to read those few rudely scrawled words, giving a low cry as he mastered their meaning, as it showed on the surface.

"See what you make out of it, sir," said the sport, holding the bit of paper where his present companion could catch fair sight of the pencil-marks. "If I really reckoned—what do you say?"

Mutteringly Seneca Spottsround pronounced those words, then looked up to meet those vividly glittering eyes. A brief silence, then he said:

"A hundred? I'd gladly give ten thousand to save the poor lad!"

"Then you really think there's—it isn't a dirty scheme to get us both out of the way while those devils jump the jail?"

This was precisely what Spottsround was expecting, and he had prepared his answer in advance.

"Does it look reasonable? The crowd has simmered down, and all is growing quiet. They've got my word—you heard me give it. No, that point don't bother me in the least, and if I knew this meant honest business—"

"You can't place the fist, then? Who was it gave you the paper?"

"I couldn't make that out, either. Somebody who didn't wish his identity known when we caught the real assassin—if we ever do!"

Eddlong gave a fierce growl at this doubt.

"We will. I've sworn to do just that. And now—are you going along?"

"Am I—whither?"

"What does it say here: to the Blow-out workings. That is—"

"I know. Played out mine, where—but that don't matter. If you really think—and it may be on the dead level, too!"

Seneca Spottsround shrewdly reasoned that the bait would be rendered all the more effective by a bit of shyness on his own part; nor was he wrong.

Eddlong made an impatient gesture as he moved away from that lighted window, then speaking in low, stern tones:

"It's a chance, anyway, and I'd risk a touch of hell itself to serve Harry Marqueduc, now he's in such sore need of backing. I'm going over to the Blow-out workings; will you come along?"

"No!" decided the capitalist, only that gloom concealing the evil glow with which his eyes were now filled.

The two men had passed fairly out of light into shadow, and just there none were nigh enough to take particular note or to give them any disturbance.

"No!" echoed the sport, halting in angry surprise. "I thought—what do you mean, anyway, Spottsround?"

"What do you mean, rather? Surely you are not giving credit to that stuff? It's such a silly joke that I took it for granted you saw through it from the start."

"You call it a joke? Why, pray?"

"Because they've already caught the real—because poor Harry himself used that knife on Rockweed!"

"That's a lie, if you do say it, sir! Harry never cut Miles; I'll go my very life on that!"

"I only wish 'twas so," sighed the

mine-owner. "I only wish we could prove him innocent before the whole world!"

"Then why not test this chance?" demanded the sport, tapping the decoy-note, which he produced for the purpose of pointing his meaning.

Spottsround took the paper and pretended to look at the words written thereon. Foiled by the gloom, he pocketed the note, then spoke again:

"Because I believe 'tis either a clumsy joke or a malicious fraud. Because I can't see why we should run 'way off yonder to learn what might have been whispered right here, if 'twas worth the hundred chucks!"

"Well, I believe it's a chance worth looking into. I'm going out yonder to learn for sure," declared the sport.

"All right. Good luck attend you, sir," coolly wished the capitalist, as he turned away with shrug of shoulders; only to be halted by a heavy hand falling upon one of his shoulders.

"Wait a bit, please, my dear fellow," spoke the sport.

"What for? What do you mean by—"

"Well, now, don't you know, I'd heap sight rather you went along to keep me company," blandly answered Headlong Hugh, white teeth gleaming out of the gloom which surrounded the twain.

"No!"

"Yes! Will you walk, or shall I tote you?"

Very smoothly came these words, and the hand of the Happy-go-lucky Sport fell away from that shoulder; but 'twas only to draw a revolver and hold the weapon where Mr. Spottsround could not well avoid seeing it and reading all that movement implied.

The capitalist flinched perceptibly, but only for a moment; longer than that might possibly have invited actual violence, and that was more than this cunning trickster wished for.

Rallying as by an effort, Seneca Spottsround spoke curtly:

"All right, since you're so set in your wishes, Mr. Eddlong. I'll go along with you—"

"I really reckoned you would, after all," drily quoth the sport.

"Yes. I'll go. But if it's all lost time, don't find fault with me, please!"

Headlong Hugh seemed content to let it go at that, for nothing further was said on either side while the two men were working clear of Hardpan, heading toward the northern hills.

But where the brain is so full of thought, the tongue can hardly be expected to remain idle for very long; and so, when once fairly outside the town and well upon their way to the Blow-out workings, Eddlong broke the silence which had reigned for some minutes.

"I don't want you to lay up any sore grudge against me, Spottsround, because I insisted on your coming along."

"Don't mention it. The tramp's nothing, and I really couldn't have slept, anyway. This ugly affair has worked me up to such a pitch that I'll hardly get over it for a week!"

"And I—look here, sir," for a moment facing his companion and making a passionate gesture; then moving on as before, speaking the while. "I'd stake my very soul that Harry Marqueduc never cut his pard in the Homestake!"

"I wish I could feel half your confidence, sir!" sighed Seneca.

"You would if you knew him clear through as well as I do. But, even if I knew the lad had made use of that knife while his head was hot and his reason blinded, still I'd stand to his back through all, against all!"

"I never was given a brother, sir, but if I had a dozen, I know that the whole bunch couldn't be dearer to my heart than is this same Harry Marqueduc! And I know—"

"He ought to be proud of such an ally, sir!"

"Never mind that part of it. What I'm trying to make you see is just this

much: I hold full faith in my pard, in spite of all that looks so mighty black against his good name right now!"

"Then you admit that it does have an ugly look?"

"On the surface, yes; but that isn't saying I think Harry cut his pard—don't you even begin to think that way, sir!"

"What other interpretation can be placed upon the sad affair, pray?" asked Spottsround, tartly.

"I believe it's all a put-up job to down both Harry and Miles," doggedly declared the Happy-go-lucky Sport, still striding onward at a rapid pace, eager to reach the rendezvous and settle once for all the question in dispute. "Heaven pity the tricksters when the whole truth comes to light, for I'll show them none!"

"How, put-up job?" asked Spottsround, curiously.

"To kill the one and hang the other, of course!"

A low chuckle, which was full of incredulity, with a taste of scorn, came from the lips of the mine-owner at this impetuous speech.

"Now you're going past the bounds of reason, my dear fellow," he said, quickly. "Who could possibly have done the stabbing, save Harry Marqueduc?"

"Which he certainly never was guilty of," declared Eddlong.

"Do you believe it was an accident, then? That Rockweed was hurt in the fall, by a knife which—well, say one of them had out?"

"Nor that, either. I believe Miles was cut by some person who took advantage of their mixing in a fight, and if I ever find out—"

"Oh, come, come, now!" expostulated Spottsround, almost as one might chide a loved but froward child. "You surely can't think that! Why, how could it possibly be accomplished, man, dear?"

"It sure was accomplished, wasn't it?"

"But scarcely after the fashion you describe. Why, just think of it! That would infer—who could run up, stab a man, and then run clear away without being seen by either of the pards?"

"Only a cunning devil, for a fact; but so it was, and when I find him out, as I surely will—well, Mr. Spottsround, I hope 'twill not fetch crape to your door-handle!"

Seneca Spottsround gave a little start at this, then exploded:

"What! Do you mean to insinuate—is this an open insult, sir?"

"Only a hint. Take it or leave it, just as you think best. Now—who comes there?" drawing revolver and turning sharply at a sound.

CHAPTER XI.

'SPRINGING THE DEATH-TRAP.

Seneca Spottsround ducked and dodged at this abrupt motion, but neither gun nor challenge was meant for him, as he saw the next moment.

Without eye or thought for his companion, the Headlong Sport took a couple of swift strides toward a clump of shrubbery lying a little to their right, fiercely alert.

"Show up or—who is it?" he demanded, sharply.

No answer came in words, but with a chattering snarl a gaunt wolf broke cover and loped away into deeper shadow.

Instantly the sport changed demeanor, for experience told him no human foe could be skulking in that quarter, and as revolver-muzzle dropped at arms' length he spoke in different tones:

"Lying up along his breakfast, eh? Wonder what sort of game he had, all to himself, anyway?"

The mine-owner drew a long breath, as of intense relief, but Eddlong failed to notice that fact, pushing into the bushes to peer and to feel, after a bit coming back with the information:

"A fawn; what's left of it! Lucky devil that I haven't got a bottle of strychnine along, or he'd surely catch the cramps right where he lived!"

Seneca Spottsrround laughed aloud, as though these words covered a rare jest, but the fact was his relief was so great as to call for some such outlet.

Believing as he did that those keen ears had detected sound or sign of the knaves whom he hoped to meet over at the Blow-out workings, the arch-schemer for those few seconds feared his evil trickery must come to worse than naught.

If it effected nothing else, that little incident served to in a measure lighten the gloom which had rested upon the spirits of Happy-go-lucky Hugh, and the two men tramped on at a brisker pace, Eddlong talking now of matters which appertained to the wild life he had led during the past couple of years.

Interesting though that certainly was, it has naught to do with the Homestake Pards or their affairs, so the matter may be passed by without further comment.

Nothing further happened to interrupt their progress, and seeing his companion glancing keenly around, Spottsrround volunteered:

"We're almost there. Things have grown up and over no little since the boys abandoned the claim, but if 'twas daylight you might see—"

"Oh, blame the past and all its belongings!" brusquely cut in the Happy-go-lucky Sport, looking keenly around while advancing further. "What I'm looking for belongs to the present, or that note lies! Now—hello, you fellow!"

Both men stopped short at this call, but no answer came; nor could they sight aught which looked like a fulfillment of that implied pledge to meet them at the Blow-out workings.

Here and there were tokens of the past, when high hopes and wild expectations had nerved the toiler's arm through many long weeks of varying weather; stumps where trees had been felled to use in bracing shaft or chamber; rocks thrown aside, dirt and debris still forming a decided dump, over which vines had slowly crawled and around which shrubbery had begun to make quite a showing.

All this to show they had not gone astray in the night, but nothing more human; naught to prove that the rudely scrawled note was something of greater importance than an idle jest.

Again the sport awoke those echoes by crying aloud, sending his notes far and wide, then adding words which might be supposed to interest the author of those lines:

"Come, pardner! The hundred chucks are ready, and another hundred to boot, if you can show us clear goods! Come, I say!"

Seneca Spottsrround was making more use of eyes than of tongue, one hand nervously fumbling at his beard the while. More to conceal the malicious smile which insisted on showing itself than aught else, however.

Still no response, still no outward showing; and with a fiercely impatient gesture Headlong Hugh turned toward his companion, to say:

"You try 'em, pardner! Maybe they'll come to their milk when they know for sure it's you to the front. Try 'em, I say!"

The mine-owner gave a shoulder-shrug, as though holding scant faith even in that expedient, but then complied, calling out:

"Show up, whoever ye may be! It's a square deal, and if you can show proof to clear Harry Marqueduc, you can name your own price!"

"I swear to that same, and the devil himself never knew me to go back on my word when once passed!" supplemented the sport.

A brief pause to look, listen, expect; but all in vain. No answering cry was heard, no moving figure was sighted, no sound was heard by those intent ears save and except the usual ones to be caught at night among the foothills.

Eddlong's growing impatience showed itself in an execration, low and fierce;

then he turned to more squarely confront his companion.

"What do you make out of it, now?" he demanded.

Spottsrround shook head and shrugged shoulders.

"What can I think of it, faith?"

"That's just what I'm asking you, isn't it?"

Clearly the sport was passing into a dangerous humor, but so far from betraying uneasiness or personal fear, Seneca Spottsrround seemed somewhat inclined to "rub it in," judging from both tone and words.

"Well, Mr. Eddlong, didn't I say that I more than half believed 'twas all a clumsy fraud from the word go? Didn't I say 'twas hardly worth investigating?"

Hugh made a savage gesture with clenched fist, his demeanor that of one whose temper was growing dangerous.

"If I really thought that way—if I caught the devil who—but I don't believe it, even yet!"

"Where's our man, then?"

"Maybe he was delayed. Maybe we got here ahead of him. We lost very little time by the way, remember," suggested the sport, yet hardly like one who places full confidence in his own argument.

Again that shrug and head-shake, followed by the words:

"I wish it might pan out to your liking, sir, but—I hope it means nothing worse than a clumsy jest!"

"Eh? You hope—what is it you're driving at, Spottsrround?" sharply demanded Eddlong, one big hand flying out to clutch an arm.

The capitalist shrunk as though in pain, giving a low ejaculation as a hand closed over those steel-like fingers.

"Let up, man! I'm only flesh and blood, while you—that's a most infernal grip of yours, Eddlong!"

"Beg your pardon. I wasn't thinking. I'm so uneasy over poor Harry and this infernal cutting mystery that I—you started to say?"

"Well, of course I may be 'way off in my fancy, but since we can't find aught of this note-writing rascal I've been thinking—"

"What?"

"Whether or no it mightn't be a cunning scheme to get us both well out of and away from town, so that the lads might—eh?"

"Might what? Out with it, confound you, sir!"

"Play horse with poor Marqueduc, then, since you will have it so!"

"Lynch him, you mean?"

"Yes. Of course, neither you nor I would stand quietly by while a mob was turning any such foul trick, and so—of course, I'm trying to keep from thinking that's just the way of it all, but now—you understand?"

Without waiting for an answer to his decidedly uncomfortable suggestion, Seneca Spottsrround turned abruptly away from the sport, lifting a curved palm to his lips and crying aloud once more for their mysterious communicant to show himself in the open.

More than ever uneasy now that this dread (which had already come to his own mind) was put into plain words, Hugh Eddlong bent head in hearkening for a few seconds.

No response was forthcoming, and with a fiercely impatient gesture the Happy-go-lucky Sport shifted his own station, springing lightly up that dump, to pause again when near its head, to look keenly around in quest of that author.

He saw only the mine-owner, whose face was turned his way at that moment, but who moved on a little further to repeat his call.

With the selfsame result, and despair grew deeper in that manly heart, as Eddlong himself turned slowly about for a prolonged, close, and thorough scrutiny of their present surroundings.

Not far from where he stood now was

the open mouth of what had once seemed the entrance to an independent fortune; the shaft by means of which the Blow-out Pards confidently expected to reach wealth beyond easy computation.

Giving this but a glance in passing, Hugh looked beyond, and was about uttering another call to the unknown, when a sharp, peculiar cry from Spottsrround caused him to whirl swiftly.

He caught an indistinct glimpse of the mine-owner, but, ere he could divine what could have gone wrong, the death-trap was sprung in good earnest!

A dark shape leaped forth from the bushes close to his rear, striking as it came, meaning nothing less than absolute murder!

The sport unwittingly saved himself in part, taking a step in the direction of the capitalist, and so receiving that fierce blow on the shoulder, as well as head.

Still, the shock proved heavy enough to destroy his balance, especially as a bit of dirt gave way under his foot, sending him reeling awkwardly back toward the open mouth of that deserted shaft.

"Down, ye devil!" snarled his assailant, striking again as he followed up his vantage. "Down to—ha!"

With a wild cry which came involuntarily from his lips as he felt himself falling, Hugh Eddlong toppled over backward, vainly striving to save himself and at the same time pluck his revolver from his belt.

His assailant slipped and fell at the same instant, a loose stone turning under his weight and sending him back down the head of the dump into the very cover out of which he had sprung when he saw that broad back turned his way.

All this Spottsrround saw from where he stood while giving the signal for springing that cunningly baited death-trap.

He held not the slightest doubt as to the good work done by his henchman, for even at that distance he caught the ugly sound as heavy club came in contact with skull; but, when he glimpsed that human tool falling as well, a cry of fierce amaze burst from his lips and he sprung forward in that direction.

"Hello, Dick!" he cried, sharply, as he came. "Have you got him, all right?"

"You bet I just did!" yelled back the young thug, as he recovered his balance and scrambled out of those bushes. "Cracked his cabeza like a rotten gourd, and then—"

"Look out, hothead!" fiercely warned Spottsrround, as he saw his henchman pushing forward once more. "If he has half a show—"

"Don't you fool yourself, boss!" called back Tate, moving closer to the shaft and leaning that way as he added: "He's gone down to see—"

That sentence was never completed.

The young thug leaned over the mouth of the abandoned shaft to peer downward, thinking possibly to sight or hear something of his victim; but, instead of that, a ruddy glare lit up the darkness below for an instant, a pistol-shot rung forth upon the night air, and with an unearthly screech of rage and pain Dick Tate flung up his arms and reeled drunkenly; then, as the dirt crumbled under his weight, he fell!

CHAPTER XII.

A COLD-BLOODED SCOUNDREL.

All this took place before the eyes of Seneca Spottsrround, causing him to stop short in his advance, fairly chilling his blood for the instant.

He heard the shot, the cry; he saw that reeling shape, and took note of its fall; then he heard the horrid screech as Dick Tate slipped with the crumbling dirt fairly into the mouth of the Blow-out shaft!

A brief pause through amazement, then Spottsrround hurried forward, yet pausing within a few feet from that fatal spot.

From there he could see sufficient for

his purpose—could see that neither Eddlong nor Tate remained above ground; and he was far too shrewd a rascal to wittingly expose his body to another such vengeful shot.

Barely long enough to make sure that Dick Tate had plunged down into the shaft, and that the Happy-go-lucky Sport was likewise invisible, then Spottsrround beat a hasty retreat.

Just in time, too!

Another of his knaves was upon the spot, eager to finger the blood-money offered by the capitalist, yet dastard enough to realize that far safer quarters might be gained through brisk employment of his legs.

"Stop, you cur!" commanded Spottsrround, as he came almost into collision with the retreating Ginger Chump. "Where are you going?"

"Arywhar out o' the range o' them—didn't ye see how Dick done ketched it, right in the neck, boss?"

Ginger paused, to utter these words, long enough for one of those white hands to close upon his nearest arm, viciously jerking him back, as the frightened knave essayed to make his flight good.

"Go easy, you fool!" harshly muttered the capitalist, all the while keeping a keen watch upon the dump, one hand gripping revolver-butt in readiness to call that weapon into play should Headlong Hugh make his reappearance near the shaft.

"But, boss!"

"Steady, I say! Can't you see just how it stands, Chump? We've gone too far to falter, now, and if we don't make a clean job out of this business, we're gone—just as surely as poor Dick is!"

Ginger shivered afresh at that allusion, but he was no idiot, and so quickly began to realize how much they had at stake.

A few words further on the part of his employer served to in goodly measure stiffen the rascal's backbone, and then there were two revolvers keeping close guard over yonder dump.

Only the one shot. Only that wild screech of horrid fear and utter despair. Nothing else came from yonder death-trap to tell those anxious watchers just how the situation now stood.

"Whar you done reckon the pizen critter kin be, boss, aryway?" ventured Ginger Chump, after a few minutes thus spent.

"Careful! Don't make a sound loud enough to pass further than my ears," warned Spottsrround, in a low mutter.

"Then you raally reckon—the sport hain't plum dead, yit?"

"I wish I knew!"

"How we gwine to find out?"

"Wait a bit longer. Surely, if he is alive and able, he will show up sooner or later! And then—shoot to kill, Ginger!"

"You bet I will, boss! Only—"

"Only what?"

"Wish't I hed a solid rest fer my pesky gun! Durned ef I ever knowed it to weigh so tarnal heavy, nur to hev the wobbles so woundedly!"

"Bah! You're turning coward, Ginger!"

"Waal, I hain't sayin' that's a lie, boss, fer mebbe—aryhow, I done wish't was all over!"

After waiting a minute or two longer without seeing or hearing aught from the sport, Spottsrround whispered further to his fellow:

"You keep a dead aim on the dump, Ginger. I'm going to sneak over yonder and see what I can find out. Understand?"

"Ef you done ketch a blue pill, boss?" timidly suggested Chump.

"I'll guard against that. Whether alive or dead, the sport is down the shaft and can't catch the drop without I stick head over the hole; and you can rest assured I'll never play the fool quite so far as all that comes to. Now—don't mistake me for Eddlong and pink me from behind, Ginger!"

With this half-jesting, half-earnest warning, Seneca Spottsrround stole silently toward the dump, slackening pace as he reached its lower edge, then advancing, foot by foot, inch by inch, almost, listening intently all the while.

Right hand gripped revolver-butt, ready to bring that weapon into play at a moment's warning; but no sight of enemy greeted his advance.

Nor did a sound come to his strained senses until—ha!

A hollow groan!

That almost surely came from out yonder shaft, but—through whose lips? Was it from sport or from thug? Was it friend or enemy?

There seemed no method of learning this, unless he should actually ascend the dump, and, exposing himself over the mouth, ask for an answer.

Of course that was out of the question under present circumstances, and, after pausing right there until a second hollow, indistinct moan came drifting to his ears on the silent air, Seneca Spottsrround beat a retreat to the spot where he had left Ginger Chump on guard.

"What is it, boss?" asked that knave, anxiously.

"Well, one of the pair is still alive," frankly admitted the mine-owner. "I heard him groan as though badly hurt; but, which one?"

"That's what! Which one?" echoed Ginger Chump.

"Not that it matters much which one," coolly declared his master, still keeping watch and ward over yonder dump, although he felt pretty well convinced that there was little danger to be apprehended from that quarter, as matters now stood.

"Not—eh?"

"That's right, Ginger. If your head wasn't thick as a pine-knot and just as dense, you'd begin to see as much long ere this."

"Waal, mebbe I'm a sort o' fool, boss, but ef so, I was bornded that way, which lets me out o' blame," bluntly spoke the knave. "An' sech happenin' so, mebbe you wouldn't mind sort o' lettin' me know jest which is what, an' whyfo?"

"We've gone too far to beat a retreat now, Ginger. We've got to make a sure job of it, or else suffer the penalty; and even a fool ought to guess what that amounts to!"

"That spells rope, boss?"

"Sure thing! Now—like this: One of those fellows has life enough left in him to groan right smart. If the sport, he must be wiped out. If Dick Tate—well, he's almost as dangerous to both you and me, though it may be after a different fashion, Chump."

"Jest how, boss?"

"Like this: If found in yonder with life left in him, and the sport for company, wouldn't Dick blow the gaff? Of course he would make a clean breast of it, and that would knot a rope for our necks. So—something like this, Ginger!"

As he spoke, Seneca Spottsrround put away his revolver, picking up a large stone instead.

With this in hands, he stole silently toward the dump, pausing only a few feet away from the abandoned shaft to calculate the distance and weight; then, to the momentary horror of the gaping thug, he tossed the heavy missile fairly into that opening!

A brief silence—then a choking scream came up from the trap of death!

Swift as thought itself the heartless scoundrel picked up stone after stone from the edge of the dump, tossing one after another into the opening, laughing aloud as he heard dull, indistinct sounds come from out those gloomy depths.

His first fury satiated in a goodly measure, Seneca Spottsrround turned that way and called to Ginger Chump.

The fellow came slouching forward, plainly a bit off his usual balance through such unlooked for events; but the master had no mercy to spare for the man.

Pointing to a ragged bit of rock which had been blasted out of the shaft long ago, he bade his henchman pick it up and throw it into the mouth.

Ginger Chump shrunk back like one dismayed, but the next instant a revolver was covering him and Seneca Spottsrround was speaking in low, harsh tones:

"Do it, you fool! You're as deep in the mud as I am in the mire, and I don't mean to leave an opening for you to sneak out of. Do it, I say, or—would you rather chew lead?"

"No, no, don't—I'll—holly smoke!"

Ginger Chump picked up the rock, staggering a pace or two up the slope until he could roll the rock into the mouth of the shaft, his fear-depleted powers proving unequal to the task, otherwise.

With the ice thus broke, it was far easier to direct his further movements, and not until they had together cast a full dozen rocky missiles down the shaft did Seneca Spottsrround call a satisfied halt.

He felt confident that no spark of life could be left in either friend or foe after this storm of stones, yet he never set foot upon the bare ground of the dump; possibly a single trace thus left might give him future trouble!

Giving Ginger a sign to follow at his heels, the arch-villain turned away from that double death-trap, meaning to finish the evil work which had been so vilely begun.

"'Twas a mighty nasty job, Ginger," he said, in low tones, "but one that we couldn't slight after first taking hold. You see that, don't you?"

"Waal, boss, I don't know, but—ha! What's that, yender?"

"Listen!" cried Spottsrround. "That means death to Harry Marqueduc!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A SCOUNDREL'S CUNNING.

Faint and indistinct through distance, yet unmistakable for all that, the sounds of firearms in irregular explosion came floating on the night air, as the two knaves turned faces quickly in the direction of Hardpan.

The solution was an easy one, and Seneca Spottsrround called out thus through a fierce triumph rather than with an idea of conveying information to his present companion.

Past all doubting lively times were having at Hardpan, and as he listened Ginger Chump gave a long sigh.

"Wish't I was thar! Wish't I hed stayed thar, 'stead o' traipsin' 'way out hyar fer to—an' Dicky done ketched it right in the neck!"

"As he should, for making such a boggle of an easy job!" sharply declared the capitalist. "With every show in the world given him, why couldn't he down the sport in a gentlemanlike manner?"

Ginger Chump cast an uneasy glance toward the old shaft, almost as though he was expecting a bloody apparition to come floating up out of those ugly depths.

"He wanted the job, did Dicky. He 'lowed he jest hed to take it onto himself, 'long of the sport makin' a plum monkey out o' him, back thar to Big Sandy's. An' so—it's the devil's own luck, boss!"

"Well, it might have been worse, Ginger," declared the mine-owner.

But Chump was not to be so readily consoled.

While words favored his mate, thoughts and fears certainly turned more nearly toward his own condition, and when he spoke again more of the truth came out.

"'Course it cain't matter a heap to Dicky, sence he's pritty nigh past keerin' whether school keeps or not; but fer us—fer me, eh?"

Seneca Spottsrround nodded, understandingly.

"You've got to have a good alibi ready

against accidents, of course, Chump, but that will be easy enough."

"How?"

"Listen!" with a nod toward distant Hardpan, where the disturbance still kept up, after a fashion. "What do you suppose can be going on over yonder, Ginger?"

"The boys playin' horse with Marqueduc, isn't it, boss?"

"Well, you were one of those same boys, don't you remember? And if nobody else happened to take especial notice of you in the gang, those same boys can and will make affidavit that you were one of the foremost in that pretty little afterpiece. Understand?"

Ginger Chump went into a broad grin by degrees, as his sluggish wit found full comprehension, but his employer remained solemn enough as to face, staring off in the direction of the mining town, yet with eyes which certainly took scant note of what might lie immediately before them.

"Waal, now, come to take that sort o' squint at it, boss, I do reckon it mought work; work to a t-y, ty, too!" enthusiastically declared he of the gingery-hued topknot.

"I wish 'twas as easy in my case!" suddenly exclaimed Spottsround, making an impatient gesture as he turned eyes once more toward yonder half-bare dump.

"The boys would take thar davy quicker fer you, boss," began Ginger Chump, only to be cut short by an impatient gesture.

"Not that way, you blind owl! How could I take part in the lynching after almost fighting to keep his neck shy of the rope?"

"Which is what sort o' gits me; gits me turrible hard, boss!"

"What do you mean by that, Chump?"

"They'd 'a' run him up a tree 'thout the trouble o' climbin', right then an' thar, but you wouldn't hear to it. Yit—this way!"

The ghost of a laugh bubbled up in Spottsround's throat at this, but instead of giving the full explanation which Ginger evidently wished for, he bluntly spoke:

"Well, if you can't see through all that, lad, 'twould be labor wasted trying to get light through that thick skull of yours. So—listen!"

"Of course I knew that a fellow like Eddlong couldn't vanish off the stage all at once without having questions asked and curiosity awakened. Of course I knew that all hands wouldn't believe he racked out of his own accord, so long as his pard was in peril of the rope."

"An' yit—durn my sister's cats ef you hain't too mighty deep fer the likes o' me, boss!"

"Indeed! Then I must be a marvel," drily mocked the mine-owner; but then, speaking on in smoother accents than he had been using:

"You see, Ginger there was hardly time granted us for forming a more elaborate scheme, and this seemed the surest as well as the easiest method out of the woods."

"I intended it should appear to the town as a case of accidental death, and that's why I put it right here; the old shaft would come in so mighty handy!"

"An' now—ef he's found, won't they come onto Dicky, too?"

"Almost certainly, and right there lies our worst bother," frankly admitted Spottsround, who apparently had fairly shaped his line of action by now. "But I reckon we can get over that by plenty of trying."

"Waal, boss, I'm tryin' to hope it right that way."

"Oh, you're safely provided for, Ginger. With the aid of Bulldog and Quinn you can prove a perfect alibi, leaving me to run the longest chance out this way."

"Like which, boss?"

Before making definite reply, Seneca Spottsround indulged in a low, dry

chuckle, as a man might who sees a rare jest in prospective.

"Another instance of poor dog Tray, Ginger! Poor Eddlong needed help to find the fellow who cut Miles Rockweed, and I was unfortunate enough to be that assistant. And so—when he caught his last sickness, of course I had to come in for a little of the same bad medicine. See?"

Ginger Chump scratched his head with an air of utter perplexity.

"Wall, boss, ef I do I do, but ef I do may I be durned ef I do!" he fairly spluttered, as those glittering eyes seemed to pin him down for an answer of some description.

Spottsround chuckled softly at this, then spoke further:

"Call it like this, Chump. When the trouble is found out, as it must be, now, it must all be laid to Dick Tate. I'll swear that he turned the trick, trying to even-up for the sport's playing horse with him over at the Arcade. Understand?"

"Alone, boss?"

"Of course not, thick-head! He must have had help to best us both, can't you understand?"

"Then—who'll them help be? Won't everybody look right our way, knowin' that Dicky trained with our crowd?"

Ginger Chump was almost painfully in earnest, now, and Spottsround was keen enough to appreciate the full force of his reasoning. Still, it seemed to be the only course left open, and he persisted.

"Don't let that fact worry you, old man. Bulldog and Owen will show up prominently enough in yonder little death-dance, and they can carry your reputation along on the same wave. That lets you out, and—well, I only had time granted me in which to recognize Dicky, boy!"

Ginger subsided, though with reluctant belief, and his cunning mentor spoke further, right hand drawing knife from hiding as he spoke.

"As for me, 'twill be harder, yet I reckon I can cheek my way through with safety. And as a fair starter—look!"

With almost diabolical coolness the mine-owner used knife upon his own head, cutting a long gash through the scalp to the bone, causing his blood to flow freely.

Ginger Chump started back with a low cry, much as though he feared his employer had suddenly lost his wits; but Seneca chuckled reassuringly, then adding:

"Just part of my defense against rope-an-throat disease, old man! Come! I want you to truss me up to yonder tree. Lively, now!"

"I don't—durned ef I kin see what—" stammered the bewildered rough, still shrinkingly.

"Act, and let me do the talking," sternly interrupted Spottsround, moving off in the direction of the tree indicated, blood beginning to fall from head to body, though as yet none had reached the earth.

Like one half-dazed Ginger Chump followed, but then he was given more light, until the full extent of that cold-blooded schemer's cunning was laid bare to his sluggish comprehension.

"Here!" cried the capitalist, as he removed coat and tossed it to the foxy-haired thug. "Never mind the damages, but slit that up to make bonds strong enough to hold fast a fellow of my size. And work lively, too, for there's a heap of business lying ahead of you still!"

While Ginger was thus occupied, Spottsround explained himself further, speaking rapidly yet clearly.

"It's pretty much like this, you understand, Chump. I was last seen in the sport's company, and since this little trick has been so badly botched, I've got to guard against all points."

"That note'll be found in what's left of my coat. Nobody can swear who wrote it; I made sure of so much at the

send-off. But it'll bear good witness to what honest motive brought me 'way out here in the sport's company. See?"

"Yes, boss," hesitatingly. "But why did ye gouge ye so deep?"

"To make it all the more binding, don't you see?" with another low, brief-lived chuckle. "That's where I caught my share of the medicine. I was knocked down, just as Eddlong got his dose. I hadn't a fair chance to see just who turned the trick, and of all who may have been mixed up in the scrape, I only recognized Dick Tate."

"It was more luck than aught else that let me see so much. Dick was trying to dump the sport into the shaft, yonder, when I caught sight of them. And just then the sport managed to pull a gun and fire one shot."

"Durned ef he didn't, too!"

"And that shot carried Dicky down the hole in his company," added the arch-schemer, showing teeth like a man who really relished the tale he was so boldly fashioning for the public.

"An' you, boss? Why didn't they croak you, too?"

"I'm coming to that part of it, Ginger. I saw so much, then another crack over the head darkened my wits for the time being. When I rallied, 'twas to find myself trussed up—like this—and the rest of the gang out of sight."

"Not all out of hearing, though, for a voice came from behind this tree, warning me to keep a close lip, and to never even breathe a hint of all I might have seen or heard, under penalty of sudden death!"

"Of course I promised; who wouldn't? Then they stuck a gag in my mouth; you want to shape one, and that in a hurry, old man! And that was the last I saw or heard of the rascals!" finished the capitalist.

"You mean it all, boss?"

"Of course I do! It's tough, but I can't see any other sure method of smoothin' the matter all over. And you: hurry back to town, find Bulldog Beebe, tell him what has happened, and for him to shape search this way in the mornin'."

"Jest Bulldog, boss?"

"Yes. Leave everything to him, and he'll know how to act. Now get me up in shape. Make a snug gag while you're about it. I'm playing for the whole porker, and can't afford to make any further mistake!"

Ginger Chump, awed into silence by this cool audacity, performed his work with fair precision, leaving his master bound and gagged, helpless to free himself, and certainly past all danger of suspicion that this could possibly be his own work.

The blood was flowing freely over face and neck as Chump took a final view, then stole on tiptoe toward the dump, there to listen for a full minute before turning and stealing off through the night in the direction of Hardpan, leaving both dead and living behind him.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LYNCHING THAT FAILED.

"Hyar's yer last sickness, critter!" cried the burly, bearded fellow in advance, as he lifted that noosed rope and shook it before that pale, proud, defiant face. "Do yer prayin' right now, fer ye won't hev no time when we begin fer to yank ye, tail-on-eend!"

The yelling, roaring, bloodthirsty crowd pressed forward, some of the leaders bearing torches, whose smoky flames cast a lurid light over all; others brandishing weapons in keeping with their savage oaths and cries, as though a bloodless hanging would prove all too tame for their maddened passions.

Partially prepared though he had been for some such move, nevertheless poor Marqueduc was taken by surprise when the crisis did come, it burst so swiftly, so completely.

Nor was he the only one caught un-

prepared for such a rush; for, unlikely as it may seem, there were true friends on the outside of the calaboose, who were briskly, if covertly, working in his behalf.

Jasper Spottsrond fell back from the barred window rather than invite open trouble, his slender figure blending with the shadows until only a keen eye could have kept track of his movements.

"Ef them fellers on duty, thar, kin only be 'pended on to do thar duty even hafe-way, lad, I reckon mebbe we mought hev a sort o' show fer to—they're comin'; red-hot, too!"

The one who muttered thus was crouching in the gloom not far away from the jail itself, eyes bent upon the front of the building, while his ears were drinking in those ominous sounds coming nearer with each passing moment.

A tall, gaunt, raw-boned fellow, whose stooping shoulders, white hair, and luxuriant beard proclaimed him far past the turn of life; yet, old, as he was, Gabriel Gannett could hold up his end in almost any sort of crowd.

"Look at the Injun, Pap!" muttered a slighter shape, which kept close to the veteran's side, one hand pointing toward Black Dog, still on guard as left by his master, gripping rifle as though determined to defend the prisoner to his latest gasp.

"Blamed ef I don't b'lieve he'll do more fer Harry than the hull guard!" declared Gannett, in similar tones. "An' ef he does begin fer to pick trigger, thar'll be some tall—look!"

Both shadows gave start and involuntary surged forward, but ere they could even call out in warning, the act of treachery seemed complete.

One of the guards selected mainly by Seneca Spottsrond made a quick move toward the half-crouching Cherokee, whose attention was wholly occupied by that approaching storm of human passions, and brought a clubbed revolver down with cruel force upon that bowed head.

With only the faintest of sounds Black Dog fell to earth like one smitten by a thunderbolt, and a second member of the guard sprung across to lend his comrade aid.

Together they quickly disarmed and bound the redskin, then carried him around the corner of the jail nearest those two crouching shapes, turning back toward the barred door without suspecting what keen eyes were taking note of every movement.

Louder grew those ominous cries, nearer came the gathering mob on their awful mission; and, knowing that 'twould be worse than folly for any two men to offer open opposition, the secret friends of the accused lay low, watching each step taken with almost breathless interest.

Then came the rush, and once again their hopes were disappointed.

Instead of offering valiant resistance to that lawless mob, the traitors unfastened the door, seemingly only too eager to join in that act of misguided vengeance.

"The cowardly curs!" cried the younger member of that faithful pair. "There's only one thing left for us, Pap: to pitch right in when they haul poor Harry out!"

"Pitch in goes!" declared the other, creeping forward, knife in hand, to cut those bonds and set Chonesta free. "You kick up little ole h—I, Pap, an' I'll keer fer the younker best I know how!"

Harry Marqueduc had expected at least a brief parley by his armed guard before actual peril could enter those four walls, and the lack of even verbal defense at the door threw him still further off his balance for the moment.

Still, the young fellow was made of good stuff, and faced his enemies with proud defiance, saying never a word until the burly knave bearing the rope

caught up the noose and tried to crowd it over his head.

Then his pent-up passions broke bonds, and uttering a low, savage cry Marqueduc struck out swift and true, fist dashing that bearded face back, and with it the rest of the knave.

A mad howl burst from the lynchers at this, and the next moment all was confusion, for Harry plunged toward the open door, striking out with both hands, fighting only as a strong man can fight who sees certain death in submission.

Torches were dashed aside and flames extinguished in that fierce melee, and the oil-lamp itself was hurled from its bracket by some wild blow, the glass breaking in the fall, the oil catching fire from the burning wick, and adding a fresh element to that crazy confusion.

A few drops of the burning oil struck one of the lynchers, and he set up a mad yell of fire, plunging crazily toward the door, in which action he was joined by all others.

To all this were added the well-directed efforts of at least three true men on the outside, some rushing into the crowd about the door to knock down or tear away the torches which shed a lurid glow over the wild scene, while Black Dog, now able to stand dizzily upon his feet, gave forth the thrilling warcry of his ancestors while shooting rapidly into the air.

A mad, crazy scene, for a fact!

Then came that rush to clear the jail through fears of the now flaming oil, and Harry Marqueduc was carried outside with the rest, almost without his own volition.

"Now we've got 'em, Pap!" gratingly vowed Jasper Spottsrond, as he saw how fortune was veering in their favor. "Down the guards and you sneak off the sport while I—both together, Gannett!"

As one man the twain sprung forward into that confused mass, each one striking hard and sure as he came within fair reach of the lynchers, who still clung to Marqueduc, in spite of his desperate struggles.

No second blow was called for, and as those hands tore loose, Jasper shoved Harry aside, while bony hands caught and jerked him swiftly in that same direction, hoping to swing him around the corner of the building before the confused lynchers could fairly suspect an organized effort at rescue or even a break for liberty.

Then, trusting all else to his gray-haired partner in that bold adventure, Jasper Spottsrond played his part to perfection.

Striking viciously at one or two of the lynchers who were nearest the accused, he lifted his voice to its highest pitch, crying out:

"Look out there! Head him off! Don't let him get away if—stop him, I say!"

At the same time he plunged forward, almost directly contrary to the course taken by Old Gabe and his charge, his wildly excited manner naturally carrying attention with him.

"This way!" he fairly screeched, as he tore through the confused mass and faced the open, where the shadows of night lay deepest. "Look! Yonder he goes! Stop him or—come, ye fools! Will ye let him cheat the rope, after all?"

"Whar is he? Broke away—gone whar—thar he goes!"

Shouts and cries from a full score of throats were curiously blended together just then, and with scarcely an exception the mob rushed in crazy haste after that slender shape, from the lips of which came guiding words at brief intervals.

Without stopping to enquire just what he hoped to gain by taking such action, it must be admitted that Jasper Spottsrond played his role to perfection, leading the howling mob off on a false scent, leaving only a few of the worse-bewildered fellows lingering nigh the cala-

boose, where the flames threatened to leave Hardpan without a recognized jail.

As for poor Chonesta, he had gone down in that wild rush, knocked out of time for a while, at least.

Again and once again did Jasper spur the crowd to greater exertion by his cries, now adding the voice of his revolver to the mad confusion, claiming that he could still spot the fugitive, in spite of all his crooks and turns.

"This way! Yonder he goes and—stop, you cur!" he screamed, sending a shot ahead, as though to enforce that call. "Here, men! Don't let him cheat justice! Head him off before—he's got to hang for bloody-butcherin' poor Miles Rockweed!"

There is no saying just how long this deception might have been kept up, only for an accident which befell that zealous pursuer.

Jasper tripped on a loose stone, falling heavily to earth, and while he sustained no serious injury through the misstep, he was detained sufficiently long to permit others in that wild-goose chase to overtake their young leader.

Panting, growling, savage of heart as he was heated in body, came Bulldog Ben Beebe, knife in one hand and pistol in the other, glaring viciously around in quest of the man whose life-blood he thirsted for.

He failed to sight the fugitive in any direction, and turned with a savage oath upon young Spottsrond, who was just scrambling to his feet after his tumble.

"Where is he? Which way did he—speak truth, you whelp! or I'll cut your heart out!"

"Over that way; I last saw him—chase, you fools!" panted Jasper, in well-counterfeited rage, and he himself limped away in the direction indicated.

But nothing could be seen or heard of Harry Marqueduc, in spite of their efforts, and again Bulldog Beebe turned toward Jasper, growlingly:

"I more'n half believe you've been playing us double, Jap Spotts—"

Swift as thought Jasper caught the drop, speaking sharply:

"Take that back, Bulldog, or chew lead!"

CHAPTER XV.

HOW THE ROPE WAS CHEATED.

Under that double impulse Harry Marqueduc was sent nearly to the corner of the jail building before he could realize what was happening, and then, before he could rally or find voice to cry out with, a horny hand was clapped over his mouth while a husky voice spoke close to his ear:

"Stiddy, lad! I'll save ye ef ye'll on'y holp instid o' henderin'. Come! Now—like a mice!"

Another hand gripped an arm and hustled him to the corner, then around it, while the bewildered fellow was struggling to free his mouth.

This move was greatly helped by the manner in which Jasper Spottsrond was splitting the confused crowd, just then, added to the blind flurry which seemed to have fallen over one and all at fall of lamp and cry of fire.

Not until then; not until the thickest of the crowd was fought fairly clear of, did Marqueduc recognize his friend in need.

"You, Old Gabe?" he panted, hoarsely, freeing his lips.

"Keerful, lad!" hastily warned the veteran, urging his charge along as rapidly as might be. "Ef them devils ketch on we're both gone suckers in a holy minnit! Ef we caln't—this way, blame ye, boy!"

This with a touch of fierce impatience, for Harry Marqueduc was hanging back in place of hurrying away, trying to join that wild-eyed mob, rather than leave them for good and all.

Then the shrill tones of Jasper Spottsrond made themselves heard above the tumult, and as he led by far the greater

portion of that life-seeking mob away on a wild-goose chase, Old Gabe Gannett was given time and space in which to make a more effective appeal.

"Come, lad! Ef ye hang now, ye'll never be able fer to cl'ar up yer record, don't ye see? Come! Hide now, fight later on, when ye got somethin' like a show!"

"Listen! That young devil is—let me face Jap Spottsround until I can—"

"You're foolish, man; plum' foolish!" angrily muttered the veteran, as he fairly forced his obstinate charge into motion again. "The boy is holpin' ye better'n any other livin' critter could do this holy minnit, an' when ye—come, I say! Want me to pull hemp, too?"

The mad roar of yells, curses, howls, and confused threats was drifting rapidly away under the stars, and half-forced by the old hunter, Harry Marqueduc moved on, pausing again when at the rear of the calaboose.

That frontier convenience was built more for the accommodation of bibulous miners or stray cowboys who might feel inclined to set up a free show of his own with throat and pistol, rather than for the safe holding of desperate criminals.

The ground sloped a little from the front, and the rear of the calaboose was raised a couple of feet on cornerstones shaped by the hand of nature.

The opening which was thus left, had been protected by boards set upright, one end driven into the ground, the other nailed to the stringer above.

One of these boards had been torn away, leaving a narrow hole, barely large enough for a human being to crowd in at; and here Old Gabe almost shoved the fugitive through, himself quickly following, then blockading the entrance with the same board which his hands had removed for their express accommodation.

After all, only a couple of minutes had passed since the lynchers made their rush for the accused, and their misguided yells and howls were still plainly audible when Marqueduc and his sturdy friend found that dark refuge.

"Lord o' love—jest hear to 'em all, will ye?" mumbled Old Gabe, as he fastened a precautionary hand upon Harry's arm there in the gloom. "Ain't he a corker, jest? An' you—tuck him fer a ginooine lyncher, didn't ye, now, boy?"

"He said—you heard him call for my life!"

"Jest to foolish the gang, don't ye see? Eff't hedn't bin jer Jap, yender, by this time you'd be goin' up a tree 'thout climbin'; yes, ye jest would, now!"

"He said—I'll face him down before the whole town!" fiercely declared the accused, those damning words still haunting his brain. "Let up, old man! I don't care to hurt you, but—let me face Jap Spottsround before he can—hark to that, will ye?"

Another shot or two; a vicious yell from heated throat; a harsh vow to make the vile assassin pull hemp.

"Hang him, boys! Killed poor Rockweed—Miles dead and—hang the bloody butcher!"

Coming marvelously distinct, considering the distance, almost every word recognizable, even as the voice itself was known to those straining ears.

Harry Marqueduc gave a low, angry cry at this, but his companion chuckled as though in high delight, while still barring that narrow exit.

"Lord above! don't he kerry it off like he was—"

"Let me pass, you old idiot!" harshly growled Marqueduc, fastening grips upon the hunter and striving to shove him aside. "I'll never—I'd rather hang like a white man than skulk from such an infernal liar and scoundrel as Jap Spottsround is proving himself right now!"

"Stiddy, lad! Cain't you never ketch on? Jap's jest foolshin' the crowd, an'

double-times-over reskin' his very life to save your neck from the rope! He is—I give ye my honor, Marqueduc."

"What? You don't—you can't mean that?"

For the first time since that queer hustle began Harry seemed to comprehend as well as hear. For the first time an inkling of the strange truth forced itself through the mental mist which had held possession ever since that luckless affray with his partner in the Homestake.

"Which is jest what," emphasized the old man. "Honest to heaven, young feller! Hope may die ef Jap isn't—hark!"

Again that ominous cry of fire made itself heard from without, and as they listened both old man and young could distinguish the scent of burning oil and scorching wood.

"Look!" mumbled Marqueduc, pointing toward the center of the heavy plank flooring over their heads. "Fire, for a fact!"

"Wall, now, I'll be eternally—blame the luck!"

"I smell kerosene! They've set fire to the jail, or else—maybe the lamp was knocked down and—we've got to get out of this, Gannett!"

"Stiddy, lad! Cool an' easy counts the biggest," warningly mumbled the veteran, although the cries of fire sounded louder and more alarming as other voices seemed to join that which had first attracted their attention that way.

"The hole shell is ablaze—can't you see?" uneasily whispered Marqueduc, assailed by a fresh fear for his life. "We can't stop here much longer. We'd roast like rats in a hole! And—the whole town'll come on a keen jump!"

"Thar's heaps o' time yit," more composedly muttered the veteran, as he put aside that board and thrust forth his head for a cautious look around. "The fire's jest inside, an' thar hain't no great—come on, then, younker!"

Not until fully satisfied that the coast was clear, and that all attention was confined to the front of the calaboose, would Gannett consent to move; but then he acted with swift decision.

Slipping aside as soon as his gaunt figure fairly cleared that narrow hole, he whispered as Marqueduc followed after:

"Keep low down an' make tracks fer them bresh, yender, lad! Don't stop ef ary critter should hail ye. Make a break fer liver, an' head fer my ole shack ef anything should hender me from keepin' step with ye. Onderstand, now?"

"All right. We'll see it through in company, though!"

So responding Harry Marqueduc left the jail and glided swiftly away toward the cover indicated by his ally, and as no cry or shot came to tell of recognition, Old Gabe was not long in following that example.

When safely under cover, both men halted for a brief look backward, using ears as well.

They saw the calaboose had fairly caught from that broken lamp and scattered torches, and knew that nothing short of a miracle could save that structure from complete destruction.

"Let 'er rip!" muttered Gabriel, with a grim chuckle. "It hedn't ought to be putt to a decent use after sech a 'tarnal lie es holdin' you fer bloody murder, boy!"

"Then you don't—you believe me guiltless, Mr. Gannett?" asked Harry, in husky, uncertain tones, as his gaze came away from house to face, hands gripping one of those horny-palmed fists.

"You bet that's right, lad! Ef I hedn't, would I be doin' of all this when—le's rack out o' hyar afore them flames show us up too mighty cl'ar, boy!"

For now the roaring, crackling flames were shooting into sight, throwing a lurid glow over the surroundings, and other citizens were hurrying to the scene,

knowing as one and all did what an awful calamity a spreading conflagration is in a "wooden town" like Hardpan.

The two men turned and hurried off, quickly passing beyond the reach of those ruddy rays, when Old Gabe gave a long breath of relief.

"Blame the 'boose, I say it ag'in! An' thar hain't none other shebang nigh 'nough fer to git ketched from it. An' so—hyar's good luck to us all, an' more foolshin' fer them bloody-minded lynch-ers!"

Thanks to the location of the jail, it was no difficult task to win clear of Hardpan on that side, and not until they were beyond risk of discovery from that quarter, and veering around toward the destination already hinted at by Old Gabe, did Harry Marqueduc speak again.

Through all, however, his brain was busy, gradually clearing away the perplexing mists, fetching something like order out of chaos.

So strongly hid his brooding suspicions turned toward the Spottsrounds, father and son, that he found it no easy matter to alter the hurried opinion formed concerning Jasper; an opinion so thoroughly confirmed by that young fellow's vicious cries and threats during the hurly-burly of a few minutes earlier.

And it was almost as much to confirm that opinion as to clear away all doubts that he spoke to Gabriel Gannett now.

"Did you really mean all you said about Jap Spottsround, sir?"

"Did I? You bet I jest did, then!"

"And he wasn't—I heard him howling for my life!"

"Jest to foolish the bloody gang, lad; jest to help me sneak you clean' way from them pizen critters," declared the veteran, pausing to tap shoulder with kindly hand and send broad, genial grin into that pair of anxious eyes.

"I thought—I took him for—"

"Which is right whar you got foolish, Harry, an' that all over; fer ef it hedn't bin fer that same younker, comin' cl'ar to my shack in a great sweat an' axin' me fer to back him up in holpin' you out o' the hobbles—waal, now, to b'lie it all down in a weenty spoon, pardner, by this time I do reckon you'd be growin' too mighty long in the neck o' ye fer comfort; that's right, now!"

There was no room left for doubting his perfect honesty. Either Jasper Spottsround was a rare friend in need, or else his cunning was sufficient to throw dust into those honest eyes.

Harry Marqueduc was not quite ready to put saint in place of sinner as yet, but he could not help giving Old Gabe full credit for his share in that night's work.

And yet words failed him, then: he gripped hand warmly in silence, then turned away to resume their journey.

That pause had been brief enough, yet 'twas amply long for working a change in affairs; for, a moment later, a dark shape sprung forward and bore Gabriel Gannett backward with resistless might!

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW BLACK DOG OBEYED ORDERS.

A low growling sound accompanied that vicious attack, more like the fierce note of a hungry wild beast at sight of its coveted prey than aught human; but slight though it was, the sound was sufficient to turn the fugitive from injustice, and show him the veteran staggering back under that assault.

An involuntary cry escaped Marqueduc's lips as he saw the twain go down together, but ere he could fairly rally or offer aid to his helper of that night, a hurried voice came to his ears:

"Run boss! Make a break while I cover—quick, young pard!"

Old Gabe rallied sufficiently from his surprise to begin a fierce struggle, but Marqueduc was even more thoroughly amazed, for he recognized first voice and then speaker as well.

"You, Injun?" he cried, springing that way and making a hasty grab at the knife-armed right hand which he saw just rising above Old Gabe's heaving bosom.

"Go, pard! Don't—I'll quiet this—"

But Marqueduc fastened upon that arm, jerking it upward and backward, effectually foiling that deadly stroke and at the same time aiding Gannett in throwing off that living burden.

"Stop—hold hard, Black Dog!" he cried, harshly, as the Cherokee writhed and twisted rapidly. "This is my friend and—he's Eddlong's friend, I tell you. fool!"

There seemed magic in that name, for the Indian instantly ceased his struggles, permitting that deadly weapon to drop from his opening fingers to earth.

"Waal, now, ef I hain't plum' billy-be-blamed!" exploded Old Gabe as he scrambled to his feet and recognized his assailant. "The Injun! An' ef I didn't take him fer a he-ole painter, hope may never see the back o' my neck ag'in!"

"I thought he was your enemy, young pard," quietly explained the Cherokee, standing in easy submission. "Hugh tell me—fight for my friend. Give your life to save his if it must be so. That is why I came like this, young pard."

"An' jest the billy-be-dog-gondest comin' I ever ketched right on top o' the back, now you want to b'lieve!" vowed Gannett, shaking himself and grinning as though taking kindly share in a brilliant jest. "'Pears like I kin see me now, tumblin' all over a quarter-section, an' him jest a-diggin' in his claws an' toenails fer warm meat! An' you—oh, whar's a easy-barked tree fer me to ketch a lean ag'in while I laugh me wide open by jerks!"

That jolly laugh proved contagious, and explanations were quickly given and accepted on both sides.

Thanks to the clubbing he had received, Chonesta proved but an indifferent safeguard for his master's pard; but he did the very best he knew how, and through good luck caught sight of the two men as they beat their retreat from the blazing calaboose.

Not recognizing the old man, and seeing that he kept weapon in hand as though guarding the unarmed accused, Black Dog crept closer until he could take chances with his sole weapon: that knife.

On his part, Marqueduc briefly explained how much he owed Old Gabe, and that when interrupted they had been on their way to a safe place of hiding until the worst of the storm should blow over.

"This is my good and true friend, Black Dog," Harry said in conclusion, taking a hand of each man and joining palms. "Now—where is Headlong Hugh, Chonesta?"

Black Dog shook his head in silence, letting fall that horny paw and casting a wistful glance around like one hungry for the sight of a loved face.

"When did you see him last, then?" persisted Marqueduc.

"Before those hot devils came. He bade me watch over you and guard your life with my own. I did what I could. I was fooled, but—I don't know where the master is—now!"

"Then he wasn't there when the rustle to hang me was made?"

"No. If so—waugh!" with a swift gesture, as more of the ancient blood flashed to the surface. "There be plenty of squaws to blacken face and cut hair, then!"

"Say, lad," whispered Old Gabe, curiosity getting the better of his native politeness. "What is he, anyway? Regular Injun, or jest a white man painted up fer to seem like it?"

"A pure blood, Gannett, and good as Nature ever put up in oneskin, too," quickly explained Marqueduc. "He's taken a full course at the Haskell Institute, but since—well, let it pass for now," as Cho-

nesta gave an impatient gesture. "Enough that I trust him fully as far as I would myself, or even you; and words can't go further than that!"

"Lord o' love, lad, but you tote a tongue that's like a bee's honey bag for sweetness!" chuckled the old mountaineer. "Ef I didn't know ye was jokin', I'd think ye was lyin'!"

"All right, pap," with an easy gesture. "Let it go at that for now. And you, Chonesta, where will you turn next? To look for Hugh?"

The Cherokee shook his head in prompt negation.

"No. Sport care for himself. He told Black Dog: watch over my young pard. That is law and gospel to Chonesta. See?"

"All right, old friend, but don't make another mistake like you did in this case. If anybody should try to dog us—"

Harry Marqueduc left that sentence incomplete, for Chonesta sprung away, to be almost instantly hidden amidst those shadows.

"Waal, now, he's a cracker-jack!" declared Old Gabe after a brief stare in that direction. "Take it fer a rule, an' I wouldn't give three whoops in hades fer all the redskins you could cram inside o' the biggest State o' the Union; but this critter—go 'way wilcats!"

"He's about as good as they make 'em, for a fact," admitted Harry as he moved on in their original course. "He believes the sun rises and sets in Hugh Eddlong, the Sport, you understand?"

"I've hearn tell o' him, though I never run up ag'inst him more'n a few couple o' times or so," said Gannett, pressing onward toward his mountain home, near which he promised the refugee a snug retreat.

A few seconds later he stopped short, turning to utter a low cry.

As if in response, Chonesta came gliding forward, pausing as Old Gabe lifted a hand, peremptorily.

"What ye doin', Injun? Follerin' us fer—jest what?"

Chonesta made no reply, standing like a statue in bronze.

Old Gabe gave a subdued snort, then spoke to Harry:

"You try him, boy. Makes me eetch all over jest to feel sech a holy terror is playin' snake ahind the two heels o' me; yes it do, now!"

Humoring his old guardian, Marqueduc complied, first asking Chonesta why he dogged their steps after being assured all was fair, then adding:

"There's really nothing for you to do here, Cherokee. Why not go look up the sport?"

Chonesta shook his head, speaking in low, dogged tones:

"No. Hugh say watch young pard. Hugh tell Chonesta do this; why Chonesta go do that? So—"

Just as he did once before, the Cherokee vanished into the darkness by which they were surrounded, and with a shoulder-shrug Harry turned toward Old Gabe, uttering:

"It's no use, Mr. Gannett. You couldn't drive him away with a club. If Hugh bade him ride on my shoulders, he'd do just that, or break something trying his level best!"

"You raally reckon he's trusty, then, lad?" dubiously asked Gannett.

"Yes," repeated Harry. "He's true as steel, clear through."

"All right, then; let him go. We'll go 'long to the shack, lad, war I'll git a bunch o' grub fer to keep your stomick ca'm ontel better kin be done fer ye all."

But little further conversation took place between the friends while that night tramp lasted, although Hardpan was left far behind them ere that jaunt reached its ending.

That proved to be at a fairly substantial cabin of stones and hewn logs, where a trim-built, more than good-looking young woman answered the guarded hail

which Old Gabe sent forth as they drew near.

"Yes, daddy; what's wanted?" asked Polly Gannett, the housekeeper and sole companion in life of this grizzled veteran.

"Scratch up a hunk o' grub, girly. I'll come back fer it by the time you're good an' ready, Polly."

"All right, daddy. And—you, Mr. Marqueduc?"

"What's left of me, Miss Polly," answered the younger man, instinctively lifting hand to where his hat—was not!

"That's all right, an' we won't waste time chinnin' over nothin' a-tall," brusquely interposed the old hunter, taking hold of Marqueduc's arm and moving away from that fan of yellow light. "You do the best ye kin on short notice, gal, an' I'll be back right smart."

Like one who feels he cannot afford to run any unnecessary risks, Old Gabe moved onward under the stars, explaining further as he went along.

"It's a right snug little hole in the rocks, lad, war you kin lay low 'long's ye like; but you kin see fer yerself, soon."

Harry found it in fact a pretty secure covert, and so expressed himself; but before all could be put into words, Black Dog again put in an appearance, silently as before, taking in those surroundings at one keen and comprehensive glance.

"Is it good, brother?" he asked, turning upon Marqueduc.

"Yes. I couldn't ask for anything better," was the assertion. "Now, will you go find the sport and tell him just where you left me, brother?"

"Yes, I will go," then turning sharply upon old Gabe, who was standing by with a half-frown wrinkling his brows.

"I am going now, White Hair. I leave my brother with you. If he is gone when I return—" stepping forward a pace to lightly tap that frosty pow with forefinger, then saying, significantly. "That good scalp, White-hair!"

Black Dog turned and quickly left the retreat, while Old Gabe stared after him in half-anger, half-amusement, finally exploding with:

"Durn an Injun, anyway! I'd ruther play with a pizen rattler!"

CHAPTER XVII.

BLACK DOG STRIKES THE SCENT.

But for the prompt interference of mutual acquaintances it is fairly probable that a more serious use of gun and knife would have followed that break in the imaginary chase after the escaped prisoner, for Jasper Spottsrond looked and spoke like one in thorough earnest, while the "scrappy" nature of Bulldog Ben Beebe had become a proverb in and about Hardpan.

But the "spat" was quieted without serious results, and that vain search was renewed, lasting with more or less persistency until far along in the night; it need hardly be said without satisfactory results to the more bloodthirsty among the lynchers.

The more lukewarm of the crowd, or those holding more valuable interests in the town itself, turned back when that red glow in the heavens above gave warning of peril to property; but, as predicted by Old Gabe Gannett, naught suffered save the calaboose itself, and that could easily be spared.

Day dawned without any clew to the fugitive or his immediate rescuers, although more than one ugly growl and black scowl was sent in the direction of young Spottsrond.

Looking back over those stirring events, it was easy to see that, if as earnest in behalf of the rope remedy for the knifing habit as he tried to make out, Jasper had shown himself particularly clumsy in the application.

Yet no man could say with any positivity that he had played them false, and so the matter rested at that hour.

Although the night was spent and no clew to the missing Marqueduc was to be had, the earliest rays of the coming sun saw men afoot and full of an interest which grew with the food it fed upon.

Few appeared to know just what was in the wind, or what was to be gained by such action; yet little by little the crowd increased, all eyes turning upon a bent form, which went noiselessly on, now in a direct line, then veering abruptly from side to side like a sagacious hound feeling for a lost trail.

That queerly acting personage was none other than Chonesta, the Cherokee, and among his followers were Bulldog Beebe and Owen Quinn.

The ex-pugilist seemed unusually glib of tongue on this particular occasion, and from time to time he gave explanation, or cast out voluntary hints to the effect that Black Dog had struck off the trail left by the fugitive knifer.

"I hain't banking no mighty much on ary redskin, ye want to know," he frankly declared, even while "tailing on" with the crowd. "But if any one critter can run the bloody knifer up a tree, this is the duck!"

"Will ye luuk at the divil!" echoed Owen Quinn, in his broadest brogue. "Sure, an' he'd thrail the ghost av a sunbaam through the blackest noight that iver—ow-ow! Will yez luuk at that, now!"

Leading the way over ground where it seemed impossible for human foot alone to leave trace sufficient for unaided eye to note, Black Dog passed further away from Hardpan, deeper into the unsettled regions, never speaking word or making sign to his curious followers save when some one of the more impatient threatened to overrun that (by them) unseen trail.

His warnings had never to be repeated, so far as that particular offender was concerned. They came with fierce scowl, with hand on knife, and its mate half-lifting recovered Winchester with muzzle turned that way.

It was a long and difficult task, even for one whose natural instincts had been developed of recent years to a high pitch, but Black Dog had fairly struck off the scent of his oddly-missing master, and only death itself could choke him off.

And so, little by little, with many breaks and pauses to recover the lost trail, that quest went on, drawing nearer and nearer the lonely spot where a hollow-eyed, haggard-faced man was waiting—waiting—waiting!

After all, 'twas not Chonesta who caught the first sight of yonder motionless, silent figure, but one of his followers, who had nothing else to do with his eyes; and as a wild shout announced his discovery, others made out that queer shape.

And so rescue came to Seneca Spottsround!

For Bulldog Beebe and Owen Quinn, each giving vent to harsh cries of indignant amaze, headed the rush which followed, each striving to be first in releasing the capitalist from his uncomfortable position.

"Oh, the dirty scoundrels!"

"Augh! The bloody, murderin' divils!"

With cries of wondering amaze the citizens flocked around, seeing how Spottsround was bound and gagged, how ghastly he looked with face streaked redly by the blood which had trickled down from that ugly gash across his skull.

As quickly as possible the bonds were severed by those enraged rescuers, but the moment he could regain use of his tongue, even in part, Mr. Spottsround hoarsely gasped forth:

"Never mind—me! Help the—Eddlong—yonder!"

"Headlong Hugh?"

"Where is he?"

"What's happened the Sport?"

From all sides came a pelting hail of

queries, and with an evident effort the rescued capitalist hoarsely added:

"Yonder—down the old shaft!"

With a fierce cry, Black Dog scattered those about him, making a desperate plunge to get nigher the rescued man to learn just what he might have to say, while others, better acquainted with those immediate surroundings, surged away in a direction nearly opposite.

A dozen of them started in the direction of that partially bare dump, but one agile citizen headed all his mates, and was first to win a view of the opening itself; but he caught a bare glimpse, then shrank away with a startled cry as of terror.

Seneca Spottsround was among those whose eyes turned that way, and as he saw that the right cue had been taken, he gave a low warning to Bulldog Ben, whose knife seemed eager to complete the rescue.

"Wait; not yet, you fool!"

"What is it, Kingsley?" cried an excited comrade as the leader came back in amazement.

"Look! I saw—look out, you!"

For the questioner sprang up that dump without waiting for a coherent answer, flashing an eager look into the open mouth of the long-since abandoned shaft.

He caught sight of a human head, a human face, seemingly suspended in the midst of that darkness; and more!

A revolver-armed hand shot to the front, and over the tube of death passed a harsh warning:

"Steady, there! Play white, or I'll lift yer roof too sudden for any sort o' use!"

Another hasty recoil, another cry of astonishment; but it was fairly drowned by the shrill yell which burst from the lips of Black Dog.

The Cherokee caught that grim warning and recognized the voice.

Flinging men to the right and the left, Chonesta made a fierce rush in the direction of the shaft, sending his assurance of aid in advance, to have his cry echoed back from the shaft itself:

"Good boy, Peter! Look out for dirty work, old pard!"

But the Indian had care for nothing else save the man for whom he had been searching, and as he leaped to the edge of the shaft he gave a shout of mingled joy, surprise, and fierce indignation, for there, seemingly suspended by a miracle over that ugly depth, was Headlong Hugh, alive and apparently unhurt!

"Who did it, brother?" cried the redskin, vengeance glowing in his black eyes as he leaned perilously far over the opening. "Tell me, that I may—who played you dirt, brother?"

"Wait, boy," with a coolness which was truly admirable under the circumstances. "Who's there with you?"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed one of the citizens as he stole nigh enough for a look downward. "Half the town, Sport, and—"

"Fetch a rope, if there's one handy," interrupted Eddlong. "I'm almost afraid to draw a full breath, this hole is so—lively, Injun!"

Chonesta sprang erect and turned to the right about, shouting forth a few words which were readily caught and acted upon.

Half a dozen men rushed off to where the horse was grazing, which had, dog-like, followed its master all the way from town.

From saddle-bow hung a neatly-coiled lariat, which would prove to be the very article most wanted right now.

Black Dog turned back to the shaft, speaking quickly:

"'Tis all, right, brother; rope coming. How—what devil played you so much dirt, Hugh?"

"Wait," again said the Sport.

Then those who gathered about that hole in the ground could take time to

see just how the Happy-go-lucky Sport was situated.

Time and exposure to the elements had wrought great changes to the Blow-out shaft; among others a decaying of timbers, a caving of earth, a gradual falling in of one side of the shaft itself.

And there, nearly a score feet below the mouth crouched the Sport, back in a small hole, where partly fallen planks and crooked logs served to hold the loosened clay from sinking further.

Here he had struck in falling after that treacherous stroke from Dick Tate's heavy club; there he had clung with the tenacity which only comes to one threatened by grim death, and there he now crouched, hardly daring to stir his cramped limbs lest that precarious support fail him entirely, letting him fall down to join his less fortunate enemy below.

All this Black Dog took note of, and then sternly ordered all others back from the brink, lest the dirt crumble and still further endanger his pard beneath their footing.

With all haste that lariat was brought, Chonesta catching the coil with steady fingers, again bidding all keep to a safe distance, unwilling that another should even share in the rescue of his white pard.

Deftly shaping a noose, Black Dog lowered the rope into the shaft, giving it a gentle sway which sent the loop fairly into the Sport's waiting clutch.

"It's like a ladder from heaven, Chonesta!" cried Eddlong, with a little laugh as he ran arm through the noose the first thing. "Now I begin to feel as though—steady, up there! Let 'em tail on, lad, and we'll see what virtue there is in—steady, everybody!"

It was like a draught of wine to one perishing with thirst, this touch of rope, down which came the thrill of true friendship from the pard above.

So much done, the rest was easy enough. Once grasping the lariat, Headlong Hugh knew there was no danger of falling, and when satisfied that enough hands held the upper end to maintain his weight, he boldly swung off from that uncertain support, to be quickly hauled upward far enough to aid himself in scrambling over the brink.

Once fairly on the dump, Headlong Hugh gripped Black Dog by a hand, laughing silently as fingers locked and eye met eye; pards before, these two men were as brothers-by-blood, even as they had long been brothers-in-heart.

No words of thanks were spoken, but none were needed. That look and hand-grip told it all.

Then Headlong Hugh cast a keen glance around, giving a start and low ejaculation as he caught sight of Seneca Spottsround, still bound to the tree where left by Ginger Chump.

A brief stare as though to make sure, then Headlong Hugh thrust the Cherokee aside, flashing forth a long-bladed knife as he sprang down the dump and toward the blood-marked mine-owner, who cried out, shrinkingly:

"Don't kill—I never—help!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HAPPY-GO-LUCKY SPORT ONCE MORE.

'Twas but another instance of a guilty conscience bringing cowardice to the surface, and as he shrunk away from that advancing shape as far as his bonds would permit, Seneca Spottsround turned ghastly pale in spite of the dried blood which so plentifully marked his visage.

Others there were who likewise misinterpreted that seeming change, but Headlong Hugh brushed them aside as a giant might so many children, laughing shortly as he caught that broken appeal.

"I never s'posed you did, old fellow," he declared, briskly, then cutting away the rude fastenings which still remained as placed by Ginger Chump. "Take a

brace, pardner, and tell me—how come ye so, anyway?"

But Spottsround seemed absolutely speechless for the time being, shrinking from his releaser, staring in wide-eyed perplexity, not yet able to fairly realize how completely his vile plot had failed.

At any other time, or under different circumstances, this conduct might have proved perilous, for even a man of his undoubted popularity; but everything went to show how severely Spottsround must have suffered, and hardly without exception those now gathered about the principal actor in this queer drama felt sympathy rather than aught less kindly.

If Hugh Eddlong was an exception, nothing of that sort showed in either face or manner.

Instead of pressing his query, he helped to place the panting capitalist to a more comfortable position, with his own hands holding to those parched lips the flask provided by a thoughtful citizen.

All this enabled the arch-schemer to rally from the shock received, and to gather once more his scattered wits.

Knowing as he surely did that should the whole truth come to light even his personal popularity would fail to save him, Spottsround steadied his nerves by a wonderful effort of will power, then turned toward the Happy-go-lucky Sport with out-reaching hand to back up his still tremulous tones:

"I'm glad—I'm overjoyed to see you—back again, sir!"

"Is that so?"

"I thought—I feared you were—dead!"

"Murdered, eh?" lightly spoke Eddlong, smiling with a return of his wonted devil-may-care demeanor. "Well, that wasn't the fault of the cur who tried his level best to down me, anyway; was it, now?"

Headlong Hugh raised his hand to bare head, gingerly touching the ugly swelling caused by that treacherous stroke.

Black Dog gazed at the significant mark, his eyes glowing. Then he gently tapped an arm, to speak in low tones:

"Who was it, brother? Where is his trail, Hugh?"

Eddlong flashed a look into those eyes, and reading his meaning aright, Black Dog lowered hand and fell back a couple of paces in grim silence.

Turning toward his companion of the past evening, Hugh spoke on:

"And you, pardner? From all looks you had a touch of the same disease that gave me the headache. How did it all happen, anyway?"

This was a question which he had long anticipated, and one against which he had fully fortified himself, although Spottsround had thought to answer it under very different circumstances.

Still, he was a player who knew how to make the best of a poor hand, and so his explanation was given, an eager, almost breathless crowd gathering closely around.

It is scarcely necessary to follow that adroit explanation in all its details, for Seneca Spottsround kept fairly close to the line as marked out for himself while assuring Ginger Chump that all would come out right in the end.

He spoke of the note which had been so mysteriously delivered the evening before, and which had been acted upon by Hugh Eddlong and himself in hopes of benefiting the falsely accused Marqueduc.

At this point he broke off abruptly, for Headlong Hugh, like one who just recalled those ominous sounds of the past night, turned to Black Dog to question and hear briefly.

Looking vastly relieved by what he had heard, the sport came back, to briskly speak:

"Go on, pardner. Get down to the sweet meat, please!"

After a most realistic fashion, Seneca Spottsround complied, telling how the cunning trap had been sprung; how he had barely caught a glimpse of Headlong

Hugh going down before an unknown assailant, when another dastardly blow felled him to earth.

And then the rest of the imaginary tale was told right graphically; how he rallied in part, just in time to glimpse the thug fall at a pistol shot; to be stricken heavily once more; to revive in bonds and with a cruel gag thrust between his jaws.

Then, still sticking closely to his text as prepared beforehand, the blood-stained capitalist told how he was left bound to that tree, with savage caution against ever breathing hint or sound of all he might have seen or heard that night.

"You can see for yourselves, gentlemen, that they didn't strike me with a feather!" was his grimly humorous conclusion, one hand going up to touch his gashed scalp. "It was a bitter, long night after the devils left me! I suffered enough to turn my hair gray, but—my worst torture came because of you, sir!" turning toward the sport and grasping a hand to shake it vigorously.

"How did you manage—how was it you are here, now—alive?"

Eddlong smiled in return, nothing in his face betraying the faintest doubt of this man or of his perfect innocence.

"Well, that was right where my lucky streak came back to me, don't you know? I might try the same thing over again, and—but I'd rather not, all the same!"

"And you didn't fall clear down, then?"

"You bet I didn't, or I'd scarcely be here, right end up and talking! I started, straight enough, but I just happened to pitch into a hole where the timbers had given away, and had sense enough left to take a grip and freeze fast to it like grim death to a Dutchman's heel!"

Then, seeing how intensely the men about were interested in the affair, Headlong Hugh spoke with less levity, briefly yet clearly explaining his almost miraculous escape from a horrible death.

He told how he contrived to make his position fairly secure, although a few cautious trials convinced him that any attempt to climb upward would surely result in a fall, the timbers were so insecure, the earth so cracked and shaken.

A brief pause as he reached this point, a quick look at those more or less eager faces, then the Happy-go-lucky Sport added:

"Just one thing more, gentlemen, all! There's a dead man down yonder shaft; who'll climb down after him?"

Startled cries broke from his audience, while various exclamations told how thorough was the sensation just sprung.

"A dead man?"

"Who is it?"

"Who killed him?"

A faint smile stole into that strong face as Hugh Eddlong listened and watched, right hand resting lightly against his hip, close to the polished butt of a navy six.

"Yes, a dead man, gentlemen," he said, in repetition, as those confused cries and exclamations died away in a low murmur. "One who thought to send me down yonder to stay until Gabriel blows his horn. I fancy!"

"Who was it, sport?" demanded an interested citizen.

"One who came back to look over and listen to my dying groans, I reckon," still ignoring that question. "I saw him outlined against the sky, and, though I felt as if slipping down to death itself, I pulled a gun and let him have it—just once!"

"You shot him, then?"

"I shot him, but 'twas too uneasy a snap to kill outright, I fancy," with another brief, queer-toned laugh as those now glowing eyes paused upon the face of Benjamin Beebe.

Barely long enough to catch those little, evil eyes with his own, then Hugh Eddlong spoke with almost painful distinctness:

"This is the first time I ever met a bulldog who was a cur!"

Beebe flinched a bit at this sharp thrust, but, as he saw more eyes than one pair instinctively come his way, he rallied, to growl, surlily:

"How? What d'ye mean by that, blame ye?"

"What do I mean, is it? Just this, Bulldog Ben; that is was your pard who gave me this beauty-spot," one hand rising to tap his bruised head, but its mate still touching butt of revolver.

"I don't—what's that?"

"I saw 'twas your pard. He tried to murder me, coming from behind my back like the curs he consorted with in life! He struck me, but you—"

"I never knew it if he did!" harshly interrupted the ex-pugilist, face turning fairly purple as his savage hatred came still nearer the boiling pitch. "I was over yonder in town the whole time, and—I can fetch a whole crowd o' witnesses, if it comes to that, curse you!"

Headlong Hugh swiftly drew his weapon as the prizefighter made a gesture which was easily misinterpreted.

"Steady, you whelp of Satan!"

"Hold on! I haven't—I'm not going to draw for—"

"Keep your hands in sight, then, and keep them empty, Bulldog. You're not one to be trusted any too far, though only a fool would pick you out of the crowd for a chief," contemptuously cried the Happy-go-lucky Sport.

"I was back in town, all the time, and when you say or even hint—"

"What I may have to say will come out bald-headed, Bulldog, and never in disguise as a hint. You say you were in town. I heard all that racket over Hardpan way, last night, and now I'll tell you just this:

"If you and your gang really lynched my pard, Harry Marqueduc, last night, I swear to skin the whole outfit, and—I'll begin work on you, Bulldog Ben!"

"We never—got away clear!" hoarsely muttered the thug, shrinking visibly from that menacing muzzle.

"All right! Now—who'll fetch up that carrion, dead or alive?"

CHAPTER XIX.

DEATH CLAIMS ANOTHER VICTIM.

These words were not addressed directly to the ex-pugilist, but were intended for the ears of the crowd in general.

Bulldog Ben gave a surly growl, loth to quit the field at once, yet by no means ready to enter into an actual struggle with the Happy-go-lucky Sport just then and there.

After a brief silence, as though to give Beebe time for making his decision, one of the citizens took a step forward, speaking easily:

"Well, sir, I don't want to crowd out a better man, but if there's no other offer made, you can count on me."

"That's white, anyway," declared Eddlong, approvingly. "It's plain enough you never took a hand in that dirty trick last night, pardner!"

"How so?"

"They were cowards as well as curs, while you are neither," complimented the sport, doing his own cause no harm by that bit of flattery.

"That's lucky; for me."

"And the same for all who train with your crowd, I take it. Now, you say you'll go down and take a squint at that fellow, pardner?"

"Yes. What am I to do with—what I find down yonder?"

"We'll see, a bit later; but first, more rope, gentlemen! Of course, I didn't measure the depth of yonder hole, but—well, if I'd been asked that question a few hours since, I'd swear 'twas a good long mile at the very least!"

For some reason of his own, Headlong Hugh seemed to prefer using tongue to hands, setting others at work while he

acted as superintendent, and kept close beside the demoralized capitalist.

Seneca Spottsround looked far worse off than the sport, and, as it may be stated in passing, was really receiving far greater sympathy from the crowd than was falling to the sport's share.

Since a saving of time was quite an object to more than one of the company, it was just as well that all who followed after the Cherokee as trailer had not come afoot. There were other horses besides that which owned Black Dog as master, and from among them sufficient rope was produced to answer any reasonable demand.

These were quickly and carefully knotted together, then a picked few were stationed to control that portion of the job, the volunteer citizen removing his superfluous clothing and making ready to descend the abandoned shaft.

All knew that a certain amount of danger attended this venture, since the timbering appeared to be in such dilapidated condition; but one and all appeared to recognize the necessity, and little further delay was made.

With one foot resting in a firm loop, one hand tightly gripping the rope, and its mate ready to fend off while descending, the citizen was slowly lowered by the strong hands of his friends, only pausing when at the bottom in safety.

A brief wait, while those who were so situated that they could do so without too much risk, leaned over the mouth of the shaft to peer curiously downward.

Low mutterings told that a match or two had been struck below, then there floated upward a hoarse cry:

"He's here, but—dead!"

Seneca Spottsround had ventured close up to the dump, together with many others, and now, as he caught the full meaning of that cry, echoed by half a score others, his breath came free and natural, almost for the first time since the miraculous resurrection of the Happy-go-lucky Sport.

A hot wave of blood rushed into his face as he caught Eddlong looking his way, but Hugh made no remark as to what he saw, merely shouting out to the volunteer:

"Hitch him on to the rope and send him up, pardner!"

Another delay which was thrilling in its interest, for the quivering of that rope told plainly enough the corpse was being prepared for hoisting; then the line was shaken and a call came upward:

"All ready, fellows! Carefully, though! He's all mashed up!"

Foot by foot the rope was drawn up and cast behind the men. And then, amid low exclamations the body was raised clear of the shaft, and placed upon the bare dump, where all might see.

Few there were who cared for more than one fair look, for death in one of its most hideous shapes was there.

And yet, while frightfully crushed and mutilated, with arms and legs broken, and bones fairly splintered, that boyish-looking face had escaped comparatively unharmed; and hardly one who looked upon that grim relic of humanity but recognized the young desperado.

"Dick Tate!"

"The fellow who tried to send me down yonder gentlemen!" sternly spoke the Happy-go-lucky Sport, then picking up the now empty loop and beginning to lower the rope for the man below.

A few minutes sufficed to fetch him safely to the surface, and when he had taken time to breathe a bit, recovering from that double strain, he was addressed by Eddlong.

"How did you find him, pardner?"

"Half covered over with rocks, poor devil! Dick Tate? I never once would have thought it—never!"

"Rocks which were cast down yonder to serve me as Dick Tate has been served," sternly spoke the sport, one hand pointing toward the dead thug, his own resting conveniently near the butt of a re-

volver. "Rocks which came after a fashion which told me at least two more bloodthirsty devils were unpunished!"

Startled words came from some of the witnesses, and Eddlong added:

"It's nothing but the naked truth, gentlemen. This fellow jumped me from behind while I was looking and calling for the man who gave Spottsround that decoy note. I fell, but I caught down yonder among the broken timbers, just as you found me a bit ago.

"Then he showed over the mouth of the shaft, and, never doubting for a moment but what I'd finish the tumble in a few seconds, I just contrived to pull and take a snap-shot. That fetched him easy enough, although I could hear him groaning and crying out from 'way down below me!"

Again those sounds of mingled interest, horror, and morbid curiosity. Another brief pause, during which the sport's gaze roved over those pale faces, to linger a bit upon that belonging to Seneca Spottsround.

Then he spoke on:

"I also caught sounds coming from near this dump, on the outside, but I didn't dare cry out. 'Twas all I could do to hold my own, with the dirt which my fall had loosened, crumbling away, sifting down through the separated timbers until—ugh!"

A realistic shiver, but the action caught the crowd.

Knowing the matchless nerve of this man as many of them did, this made them more nearly realize just what his recent experience must have been, for the effects to linger so long.

"Deep down though I was, I pledge my word that I could hear one of those devils creep up this very dump to listen; and I know that he must have heard those groans from the bottom. If not, why was he in such haste to throw great rocks into the hole? Why did he rain stones down after that murderous fashion?"

"Did he—did they do all that, sport?"

"Did they? Ask Martin how he found—this!" cried Eddlong, pointing at that ghastly evidence lying nigh his feet. "Look at this, and then ask how came it so—if you can, gentlemen!"

For a full minute all was excitement and commotion. That graphic recital had thoroughly worked the men up, and if the authors of that fiendish deed had been within fair reach just then, short would have been the grace granted them.

Headlong Hugh waited for a little, then turning directly upon Seneca Spottsround, speaking distinctly:

"Was it Dick Tate who gave you that note, sir? Think; can you recognize him, now?"

A brief pause as though for sober thought, then the capitalist slowly shook his head, following with the words:

"I am not sure. I can't say, for certain. It may have been, since all this happened. He may have thought to lure you off here, thinking to play even for the thrashing you gave him—"

"And his pards as well!" with a glowing look toward Bulldog Ben and the Irishman, who stood just a little removed from the thick of the crowd.

"Maybe so; I'm not so sure, of course," added Spottsround.

"And who was it downed you, then? You surely ought to be able to locate them?"

"No, I'm sorry to say. I was struck down at nearly the same time you were assaulted, Mr. Eddlong. I was dazed, and never fairly recovered my wits until the scoundrels had left me, bound and gagged, just as I was discovered by these good friends."

Words came freely enough now, and there was nothing to find fault with in that explanation.

Not one of those present but had seen the speaker bound, gagged, and blood-marked, while the wound upon his head surely spoke for itself.

Whatever his suspicions may have been, the Happy-go-lucky Sport could hardly broach them now, in face of such overwhelming evidence.

"All right, sir; no harm in asking, though! I'll live in hopes of meeting the dirty whelps of Satan on a more equal footing ere long.

"As for now, I'm sharp-set enough to eat a mangy wolf raw, without pepper or salt! So—just a final word for those who may need it."

Again that keen, almost scorching gaze, passing from face to face as though singling out enemy from friend or neutral.

"Do what pleases ye with this car-lion," touching that horribly mutilated corpse with the toe of a boot as he spoke on. "I shot him, but those sneaking devils killed him with the rocks they intended should crush me—like this!"

"Now, if anything further is wanted of me, I'll be at Hardpan. And I'm one of the easiest fellows to find you ever ran up against, gentlemen and curs, saints and sinners! Until then—good-by!"

"Come, Injun, let's get a wobble on us. I'm that hungry I've got to hit a hashery right smart, or—well, I'll eat a hoss with out skinning!"

Headlong Hugh stepped briskly down the slope, leaving the dump with its ghastly burden and those witnesses, moving away in company with the Cherokee. And never a hand or word was raised to check his progress!

When the two pards, with the faithful mustang trailing at their heels like a dog, were safely beyond sight and sound of the gathering, Chonesta briefly told where he had last seen Harry Marqueduc, with an extra sentence or two through which the sport gained a fair idea of how that escape was managed.

On his part, the Hercules cautioned his red-skinned pard to keep a close tongue between his teeth, and to trust no person until after the case had been thoroughly discussed.

"Just now we haven't the time to spare," he declared, striding at a brisk pace for Hardpan. "There's Miles Rockweed, first. You haven't any late news of him, pardy?"

Black Dog shook his head in negation. Although he did not say as much, he had given thought and care for naught save his missing friend.

There was more truth than poetry in Eddlong's plaint of hunger, for he had not tasted food since noon the day before; but when the two pards entered Hardpan and headed as directly as possible for the hotel with which the sport was partially acquainted, 'twas for something else than a square meal, first of all.

As luck would have it, he met Dr. Branscombe at the portal, and at once asked how the wounded mine owner was faring.

The man of medicine shook his head gravely, then answered:

"Too late, sir; poor Rockweed died at daybreak this morning!"

CHAPTER XX.

PASSING FROM DEAD TO LIVING.

This announcement came as a severe shock, for Hugh Eddlong had all through held firm faith, in spite of the serious nature of his hurt, the Homestake pard would pull through with life.

"What! Surely you don't—you're joking, man!" he cried, after that first instinctive recoil.

"I never indulge in joking, sir," stiffly declared the doctor, bowing and making as though he would pass on his way.

But Headlong Hugh was in no humor for sticking at trifles, and his powerful arm barred passage at once.

"Hold on, doctor!"

"What do you mean, sir? How dare you—"

"That's all right, old man," with more placable tones, yet holding to his will as he knew so well how. "You and I ain't going to mix in a row, ye know, but—it's pretty much like this; see?"

"Once before you made a little mistake which might have cost another and far more valuable life—"

"Sir!"

"That's what! Of course, any man is open to make a mistake, and where it's nothing worse than an error of judgment—easy, please!"

Dr. Branscombe sought to force that arm aside, but in vain. The Happy-go-lucky Sport spoke on, swiftly:

"You can go in a moment, doctor, but it's got to be in my direction. I want to see Miles Rockweed—"

"You know where to look for him, then!"

"But I'm too mighty bashful to go alone; don't you savvy, doc? And so—come on, doc. You don't want me to tote you, pig-back, do ye?"

Evidently the sport intended to carry his point if he did not carry anything else, and, making a virtue of necessity, Dr. Branscombe turned to the right about, leading the way into the hotel, upstairs and then into the chamber which had been so hurriedly prepared for the reception of the injured pard.

At first glance Hugh Eddlong saw that his visit was paid in vain, and that the fiat of fate had been fully carried out.

A still shape lay upon the bed, covered with a sheet.

"Are you content, now, Mr. Eddlong?" asked the physician, in cold, almost harsh tones.

But no answer came from the sport's lips.

A momentary pause, then Headlong Hugh stepped silently to the bedside, lifting and turning back the sheet to expose what lay beneath.

Surely dead, yet not prepared for his final resting place, there lay all that remained of Miles Rockweed, foully done to death!

For the better part of a minute perfect silence reigned in that rude chamber of death.

Headlong Hugh stood with clasped hands, gazing down upon that white face, softened and beautified by the grim finger of death.

Near the open door stood Dr. Branscombe, tall, gaunt, looking almost sepulchral in his black suit.

Near to hand was Black Dog, cool, alert, watchful; a veritable watchdog over his beloved pard and heart-brother.

Then the spell was broken by the sport gently replacing the sheet, turning toward the door, face grave and eyes deeply troubled.

None could better realize how much this death would add to the peril which already menaced the very life of that other pard in the Homestake Mine.

Dr. Branscombe left the chamber last, closing the door and turning key in lock, saying by way of explanation:

"I was on my way to find somebody to care for the corpse when you interposed, sir. Now—are you satisfied?"

"That Miles Rockweed is dead? Of course. And if I owe you any apologies, doctor, please consider them made, will you?"

Branscombe waved hand in dignified fashion, then spoke further:

"It may be as well to tell you this: what I feel in duty bound to make known to the whole town, sir; that the very last words spoken by my poor patient repeated his former charges."

"You mean?"

"He swore that Harry Marqueduc stabbed him, and was accountable for his untimely decease, sir," gravely responded the physician.

Headlong Hugh gave a shoulder-shrug at this, showing no outward emotion, although the words cut deeply enough below the surface.

"Poor devil! If he wasn't dead and past accountability, I'd call him a liar! As it now stands—he was mistaken in the man."

It was the doctor's turn to lift shoulders in eloquent silence, and realizing how impossible it would be for them to

agree upon that important point, the sport gave Chonesta a-signal and moved briskly away.

Even now Eddlong did not yield to the demands of his interior man, but left the hotel, casting sweeping glances around as he strode off, the Cherokee following behind, with his faithful mustang bringing up the rear.

Noticing this, Headlong Hugh bade Black Dog go stable and feed his nag, since its services might be required ere many more hours.

An interchange of glances where eyes spoke fully as plainly as ever lips could, then the Indian obeyed, leaving the sport to take his own way in solitary.

So far the sport failed to see aught of Seneca Spottsround, although he felt fairly certain that some, at least, of that hill-party had reached Hardpan during the time he was busy at the hotel.

After a brief look around without success, Eddlong turned back to rejoin the Cherokee in front of the tavern, then both entered and ordered a plentiful meal; as Hugh put it, a square feed for a round dozen!

The two oddly matched pards did ample justice to what was set before them, consuming the better portion of an hour at table; but then, as the sport lightly phrased it, they had a heap of lost opportunities to make amends for! Passing a few words of direction to his red-skinned pard, Eddlong left table and hotel, again passing through several streets and making the best possible use of his keen eyes.

Still he could see nothing of Seneca Spottsround, although he did catch a passing glimpse of Bulldog Ben Beebe, in company with Owen Quinn and another bearded rascal, whom he recalled as having figured in that bar-room episode the evening before.

Finally, like one whose mind is fairly shaped at last, the Happy-go-lucky Sport turned squarely in the direction of the house where Seneca Spottsround lived, walking up to the front door as though he himself was lord of all he surveyed.

Eddlong was spared the trouble of knocking. The door swung open at his approach, and a beautiful young woman appeared, sight of whom caused his big brown eyes to fairly glow and glitter.

"Oh, sir! You can tell me how—Mr. Marqueduc—he is not—"

As by instinct Headlong Hugh divined the truth; this was Milly Fickeson, ward to Seneca Spottsround, beloved of the man whose name came so tremulously over her lips just then.

"He is alive, and safe," swiftly assured the sport, coming nigher, his eyes flashing further, to make sure no other person was there.

"Thank God! thank God!" gasped the poor girl, plainly betraying how intensely she had suffered through suspense and anxiety.

"You needn't worry on Harry's account, my dear," said the sport, now close enough to clasp one of those trembling hands, hot and feverish to his touch. "I tell you that, and I am his friend to the—"

"I know! You are—he has often spoken to me of—and he is—Harry is well?"

"Safe and well, just as we mean to keep him, too," declared the sport, thinking it no harm to "jolly" her spirits a bit, even if he were taking a great deal for granted against such ugly odds.

"Oh, sir, I am so glad! I couldn't rest, or think, or do anything but—and there was no one here to tell me how—those awful cries and the shooting and the fire—oh, I thought I must go crazy!"

That excitement was fairly hysterical, and Eddlong knew the girl ought to find both rest and quiet; but he likewise had thought for his unfortunate pard, and so pressed a point further.

"Then you were worried mostly about Harry, is it, my dear?"

"Of course!" with widening eyes. "I thought—then Harry hasn't told you, sir?"

"Well, not nearly so much as I trust he will, when we have more time to spare for talking over matters and things in general. For now—I want to ask you this: Were you engaged to marry, Miles Rockweed, Milly?"

"Never, sir!" with hot flush flying into her fair cheeks. "I fairly hated him, and when—why do you ask me that, sir?"

The Happy-go-lucky Sport caught her hands in his, drawing her a bit closer, then kissing her full between the eyes!

"That's for Harry, my angel!" he cried, as Milly shrunk away with just the ghost of a cry. "I'll carry him word that you are true to him through thick and thin; may I, little one?"

"Yes, yes! I never—you are his true friend, so—I love Harry with all my heart and soul, sir!" impulsively panted the maiden.

"And you'll never distrust him, no matter what others may tell you? You'll not think him guilty of such a foul deed? You are true to him, Milly?"

"Yes! I am true; I will stand firm and true to my love until death! Tell him all this, and say—oh, why may I not go to him, now he is in danger? Say that you will take me—"

The agitated maiden broke off at this point, shrinking back with paling face as she caught sight of her guardian swiftly coming that way.

Something in her face warned the sport, who flashed a look over shoulder, then took time to add in a whisper:

"Watch and wait, Milly! I'll tell Harry, and you shall see him, sooner or later, for—"

Milly broke away and the sport turned at sound of her guardian's voice, Spottsround calling out sternly as he approached:

"I've been looking for you, sir. A meeting of citizens has been called to take action in regard to the murder of Miles Rockweed!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HAPPY-GO-LUCKY SPORT'S DEFIANCE.

Milly had drawn back so far that the sport could catch but an indistinct glimpse of her as his gaze came back.

One little hand rose to her lips in gesture denoting caution, then he turned to more squarely confront the frowning capitalist.

"Looking for me, were you, my dear sir?" he smoothly uttered, as he left the doorstep and advanced to meet the other man.

"To give you fair warning, yes. Do you care to attend?"

"Yes. And I'll have something to say, too, if the court knows herself. Where is the meeting to take place?"

"I'll show you, if you wish. I'm going back there, myself. And you were—speaking to my ward, I believe, sir?"

"To Miss Fickeson; yes. Asking for you, my dear sir. And that reminds me of the glorious old hymn; two tongues with but a single theme, two chins that wag as one! Ahem! Latest version. Up to date!"

Headlong Hugh smiled bland as butter as he slipped a hand through the arm nearest him, moving off in the direction of town.

Seneca Spottsround hung back a bit at first, as though he had some sort of business in the house; but then he yielded to that gentle force, and the two men moved away in company, outwardly the closest of friends.

So far the Happy-go-lucky Sport had not let fall a single word that could be construed as suspicion or knowledge of the real part his present companion had played in the trick which came so near to ending Eddlong's life-trail forever.

He talked and acted more genially than ever; but that very effort warned

the scheming capitalist that all was not to be smooth sailing for the future.

Notwithstanding this very natural fear, Mr. Spottsrond could not let that recent interview pass entirely without notice, speaking in almost harsh tones after a few moments' silence:

"I'm sorry I wasn't at the house to give you greeting, Mr. Eddlong."

"Oh, don't grieve, my dear sir. Although I wasn't there more than a round minute, I got along finely—splendidly, in fact!"

"And worked more harm than I can undo for a week, I expect! Your pardon, sir," as the sport gave start and stare of innocent amazement. "But I mean it, too! My ward—what did you tell her about Harry Marqueduc?"

"Devil a lie, anyway, sir," quickly retorted the sport. "That he was as innocent of this cutting scrape as a newly-born babe, and that we'd fetch him out on top the heap right soon; too mighty soon for the good health of the dirty whelps of Satan who've been engineering this job!"

Seneca Spottsrond made an impatient gesture at this blunt speech.

"Just as though the poor child wasn't silly enough to start with? And now—the blow will fall upon her head with tenfold force, just because you've lifted her hopes so unnaturally high, sir!"

"What blow?"

"When Marqueduc pulls hemp as penalty for his bloody crime, of course!" bluntly explained the mine-owner.

Headlong Hugh gave shrug of shoulders and a curt grunt at this.

"You're foolish, man; or worse! When Harry Marqueduc hangs for a crime he never committed—well, Hardpan will have an overflow of funerals! Mind you don't have a front seat, my dear fellow!"

This none too polished hint served to break off that interchange of words, and nothing further was said until the place of meeting had been reached.

Already a large crowd was on hand, with other citizens coming to the front as the word circulated. One and all appeared to feel a powerful interest in the matter, and, as he looked around upon those faces, Headlong Hugh had scant difficulty in forming an opinion as to the general sentiment.

That was strongly against his luckless pard, and so far as a trial was concerned, the verdict to be given was an already foregone conclusion.

This was readily gathered from such low talk as passed on different sides while that meeting was being regularly organized, and, knowing that he would be wasting his time in trying to stem the tide so early, Headlong Hugh stood in grim silence through those preliminaries.

Although a typical mining town of the middle class, Hardpan possessed a sort of legal organization, and now her mayor was nominated and elected as permanent chairman, with the town marshal to back him up in his decisions.

A dozen of the more influential citizens were selected to serve as sort of supreme court, to whom all uncertain points were to be submitted, their decision to be final.

Then witnesses were called upon to tell all they knew concerning the recent lamentable affair, in which one of their fellow-citizens had been cruelly done to death.

There were no lack of volunteers, each of whom had more or less information to offer; but as a few curt questions put each one by the Happy-go-lucky Sport went to show, all were witnesses after the cutting, not prior to that event.

Upon one important point there was unanimity; each witness swore that Miles Rockweed charged his partner in the Homestake Mine with doing the cutting.

"Because he was so busy fighting Marqueduc that he hadn't time to see the dirty cur who really did down him," explained Headlong Hugh.

This was his religious belief, yet even

he realized how improbable that defense sounded, and the low mutters of incredulity with which his words were greeted hardly surprised though they might anger him.

After a number of witnesses gave their testimony as to the fight and what immediately followed it, Dr. Branscombe was called upon to take the stand; and as that tall, dark figure pushed to the front, Eddlong watched with frown deepening and eyes catching a dangerous glow.

From past experience he knew pretty much what to expect from this witness, honest though he undoubtedly was.

Just for a couple of seconds their gaze met; long enough to send an unusual tinge of healthy color into that long, gaunt visage, for even the sport himself scarcely realized how menacing was his scowl just then.

Possibly that stern look had something to do with the testimony offered by the man of medicine. Certain it is that he showed no particular animosity against the accused, confining himself strictly to facts.

Like one in duty, bound, Dr. Branscombe told of the injury, its location, its nature, and the important organs affected by the insertion of that foreign substance: the steel blade.

Then, in answer to a question put by the mayor, he admitted the damaging fact that, only a few minutes before his death, Miles Rockweed repeated his former assertion that the hand of Harry Marqueduc surely drove that deadly weapon into his back.

"And an honest man, knowing that he was lying upon his death-bed, would hardly tell a deliberate lie!" commented the mayor, his opinion clearly formed in advance of the verdict.

At this juncture Headlong Hugh pushed more to the front, face aglow with honest partisanship, the whole man ready for argument or for fighting, just as the case might justify.

"I object to any such one-sided statement from a gentleman in your present position, Jim Strong!" he cried, vigorously. "You are here to preside over a law-and-order meeting; to hold the scales of justice with impartial hand; to give the living a square deal, as against the dead!"

"But not to yank those scales all one-sided, sir," retorted the mayor, flushing warmly at the insinuation.

"That's precisely what I'm saying, sir, and exactly why I object to your recent comment on Doc's statement. For, mind you, sir, I never knew a man to die from stab or shot—and I've seen my full share, too!—I never knew one to go off the hooks as a perfectly sane man!"

"How do you mean? What do you mean by that?"

"Without exception they were off their nut; loony, you might call it without stretching the truth any too far. And so I claim it was with Miles Rockweed; he didn't know what words crossed his lips, or he'd never die with a mistaken lie upon his conscience!"

For a brief space silence followed, to be broken by hisses which came from several different quarters.

"Snake or goose; take your choice, gentlemen!" cried Eddlong, lip curling in defiance as he flashed a look over that gathering, trying to note more particularly those whose disapproval found expression after this disagreeable fashion.

"Order, all!" thundered the mayor, pounding the box before him with butt of revolver. "Quiet, everybody! It's sober business, now, and—the case rests with you, gentlemen of the jury; make your verdict, please!"

Headlong Hugh stood in grim silence with folded arms, knowing to a moral certainty what was to follow, but prepared to meet even that with nerve.

The select court put heads together for awhile, but that was mere form than material, since there could be but one ver-

dict given on the evidence offered: that of guilty!

A grim silence followed the open announcement of their decision, then the mayor (and judge) rose in his place, lifting a hand to command both silence and attention.

"Fellow-citizens," he spoke, "you have heard it all, and that leaves me mighty little to say. Just this: In the name of Hardpan I pronounce Harry Marqueduc a runaway murderer, and on behalf of the city I hereby offer a reward for his arrest, dead or alive, of five hundred dollars!"

"And if the city kicks against footing the bill, durned if I don't go down into my own pocket after it; so there!"

A chorus of cheers greeted this characteristic speech, but the uproar quickly subsided as the stalwart sport was seen stepping to the front once more, right hand clenched and uplifted, as though demanding both silence and a fair hearing.

"That's one side of the question, fellows, now listen to me," he spoke, voice clear and ringing as a silver bell. "Of course I can't expect to lick the whole town, but this much I can and will say: Harry Marqueduc is my friend and side-partner. You say he is a murderer, and I say—you lie like dirty curs from start to finish!"

CHAPTER XXII.

BULLDOG BEN TACKLES THE SPORT.

The uplifted hand came down to grip a pistol butt, but instead of weapons flying forth to avenge the insulting words several half cheers told how surely genuine pluck is recognized by brave men.

But Headlong Hugh was not to be so easily appeased. His head was hot, and his tongue cast loose. His big, brown eyes glittered with a reddish lustre as they flashed a look of scorn over the assembly.

"Bah! If you reckon to save your ears the solid truth by throwing out a wenty sop like that, you're way off your base! I've got it in for just such double-faces, and so—right here you have it, all!"

"I repeat: Harry Marqueduc is my friend and pard, and I never was more proud of that fact in all my life than right now and right here!"

"You dare to daub him with the foul crime of murder. I say you lie when you call him that! I say you are like the dirty cur that snaps and snarls at a man's heels, but tucks tail and runs yelping to its hole if that man but turns a look his way!"

"Harry Marqueduc may be playing in hard luck just now, but he is a man from start to finish. He is as innocent of this foul deed as the best and holiest body amongst ye. I say it, and I'm standing here by my lonesome, ready to make good my belief with anything and everything from tongue to toothpick, reason to revolvers!"

"Me, too, you bet!!"

And Black Dog, the Cherokee, handled his Winchester just as though he felt eager for the real amusement to begin!

"Steady, pardy!" warned Eddlong, with a backward wave of his hand to that faithful shadow. "I'm doing this part of the show; please. And you men of Hardpan, just another word to make it all more binding."

"Knowing as I do that my pard is entirely innocent of this crime, I give you fair and full warning: I'll shoot the first person who offers Harry Marqueduc harm, and if he does pull hemp—well, you want to say good-by to your loved ones before tailing on to that rope, for I swear to kill the last man-jack if my health holds out!"

There was no room left for doubting just what the Happy-go-lucky Sport meant, surely!

That defiance was received after various fashions, some cheering his nerve, others scowling blackly as though his blunt words rankled in the quick, others

grimly grave, and all the more dangerous for that fact.

Enough was evident, however, to see that, no matter how popular he might have been as sport, and hail fellow well met, Eddlong was now on the unpopular side of the main question, and possibly building on that fact, Bulldog Ben Beebe came to the front after his old-time manner.

"Talk's good, but it takes money to buy whisky, critter!" he began, looking none the more handsome for that purple "mouse" under his left eye, relic of the little affair at the Arcade. "And you hain't even half the man you think you are—only for those guns of yours!"

"What do you mean by that, Bully?"

"What do I mean, is it?" echoed the ex-pugilist, lifting a closed paw as further token. "Just this: that man to man I can make you squeal like a stock-hog with a hound chawing its ear!"

Scarcely elegant as to language, but a retort which left little room for imagination to go astray in.

It is but a single step from high tragedy to low comedy at the best, but now the crowd swiftly caught on, and instantly improved the opportunity, probably a score of lusty voices calling out in unison:

"Make a ring and let 'em fight it out!"

"Make him shed his guns, gents, and I'll wipe up the earth with him afore he knows which is what!" valorously declared the thug, really eager to "play even" for his recent discomfiture at those muscular arms.

Nearly all eyes were now turned toward the Happy-go-lucky sport, eager for his acceptance, yet far from assured that a "gun-fighter" would or could come down to a battle with nature's weapons.

For his part, Headlong Hugh was smiling after a peculiar fashion; his brown mustaches curling away from his mouth, lips parting sufficiently to afford a brief glimpse of his strong white teeth.

The condemnation placed upon his luckless pard had stung him to the quick, rousing his fiercest passions, and making him fairly long for a vent; and though this was hardly what he desired, still 'twas better than nothing!

"It's my guns you're afraid of, then, Bully?"

"Yes! I can't lick them, but I can eat you up—just eat you up in a holy minute! Shuck your tools and come see me—if you're not the dirty cur you try to make other and better men appear!"

"Answer a fool according to his folly, gentlemen," remarked the sport with a low, amused chuckle, at the same time unbuckling his belt and passing it back to the Cherokee, who pressed forward to accept the charge.

"Keep both eyes open, Injun. Don't chip in unless more than that ugly cur tackles me; but then—bite to the bone!"

"You bet!" quoth Black Dog.

Satisfied now that they were going to have a bit of amusement quite to their fancy, the men of Hardpan spread out in a wider circle, forming a ring which promised to be amply large for the exhibition of the manly art which was to follow.

Bulldog Ben laughed aloud in savage joy as he found his challenge so promptly accepted; for he held perfect confidence in his own prowess with fist and foot, both having been so frequently tested in "the magic circle" of bygone days.

"Oh, but I won't do a thing to him when we cross daddles!" he chuckled while stripping to the buff, waited upon by Owen Quinn and Ginger Chump. "Jest watch me mash him, mates!"

"See that ye do that same, thin, Binny, me boy!" mumbled the far less confident Irishman. "Betther you thin me, begorra!"

"What? You reckon I can't best him, is it?" indignantly cried the prizefighter as he tossed aside his shirt, then lifted

his arms over his head for his seconds to tighten belt and make sure his lower garments were all secure for the strain to follow.

"Course we will," soothingly muttered Chump, scowling aside at the far less confident Patlander. "An' jest mash him like a pancake fer me, pardner!"

"When I get through mashing him for myself there won't be nothing left for you, Ginger," chuckled the bully, afresh.

Happy-go-lucky Hugh took less time to make his arrangements, merely throwing off his big coat and rolling up his sleeves to give his muscles fair play, then standing at ease and watching his burly adversary with lip curling in careless scorn.

"Reckon ye kin do him up, sport?" asked one of the citizens, in lowered tones, his own doubts written far too legibly for mistaking.

"Tell ye better a minute or two later, Bisbing," came the cool reply. "But of one thing you can rest assured."

"Eh? Which? What thing's that, sport?" eagerly asked the citizen.

"That if I don't best him he'll surely do me up," jestingly came the answer, then Eddlong lightly crossed over to where Chonesta was on guard, watching over the interests of his white pard.

What passed between those two men can only be surmised, for no other ears were keen enough to catch even an inkling of those whispered words; but Headlong Hugh was still smiling as he came back, ready for the supreme test of muscle and skill.

By this time the spectators were growing impatient, and various sharp calls were sent toward Bulldog Ben.

He paid not the slightest attention to these, every movement showing the old hand, who was not to be hurried nor rattled in the least.

But then he was in readiness, and jauntily stepped toward the centre of the ring, speaking as he came:

"It's to be a fair fight and no favor, of course? And nobody to chip in from the outside until one or the other calls enough? Is that the way of it, sport?"

"Fix the funeral ceremonies to your own liking, Bulldog," coolly answered the Hercules, that smile broadening into a grin of fierce anticipation as he put hands on guard. "I never learned how to holler, and I couldn't say 'enough' to save my life!"

"Then you'll surely die a-trying!" viciously growled the prizefighter, coming on guard and sparring for an opening with all the cool skill of a veteran.

In the eye of an artist Headlong Hugh would have found highest favor, being by far the most picturesque; but one fairly up in ring lore and tactics would unhesitatingly have decided in favor of Bulldog Ben.

His every movement betrayed trained skill, while the sport, although foiling those initiatory feints and actual blows, seemed by far less at home with his fists.

Beebe was swift to see as much, and that fact added to his already overweening confidence, all of which doubtless had something to do with what followed.

Having fairly "felt" his man and "taken his measure," Bulldog let up in his sparring and began work in sober earnest, showing himself well versed in using both hands, striking swift and straight to the mark.

And yet—somehow those blows failed to connect as they should!

With an agility wonderful to see in a man of such massive proportions, the Happy-go-lucky sport evaded every stroke, dancing on tiptoes as light as the proverbial feather; dodging some blows, turning others aside with his muscular arms, laughing the while like one hugely enjoying himself.

But then the chance came for which both men were waiting. Headlong Hugh purposely left an opening, knowing that he could not hope to conquer Beebe with

fists alone, and willing to take one blow for the sake of fairly closing.

With a savage cry Bulldog jumped at the chance, and as his fist shot out, Hugh ducked so as to render it partially harmless, then closed.

Ten seconds of fierce struggling, then—Bulldog Ben was lifted off his footing, turned over as he was heaved high in air—to be cast headlong to earth the next moment, with the sport adding his own weight to the fall!

CHAPTER XXIII.

HEADLONG HUGH'S GRIM WARNING.

There was an ugly snapping sound as the sport fell squarely on top of that discomfited knave, then rolled over, to swiftly spring to his feet in the clear, just as Ginger Chump cried out at the top of his voice:

"Holy smoke! Broke his neck, or I'm a liar!"

That was but putting into words the first fancy of nearly half the people present, and more than one bronzed face turned pale as its owner saw how awkwardly the prizefighter lay there in the dust.

Hands open and fingers twitching, limbs a-tremble, body shivering like a mass of ill-shaped jelly; never a sound coming from his lips, nor an effort being made to arise.

Quickly as the sport moved, Black Dog was fully as alert, and almost the instant he gained his feet after winning the fall, Happy-go-lucky Hugh gripped revolver butt in each hand, throwing the weapons back until tip of barrel lightly rested against shoulder, eyes aglow as they swept around that startled assembly, voice clear and distinct as though he had not just passed through such a fierce struggle.

"He begged for it, and now he's got it. Who dares to even hint that it isn't a fair prescription?"

Owen Quinn reached the fallen gladiator, pulling him partly over to free his head and neck, then caught the bullet-shaped caput between his hands, giving it a vigorous test, they crying out:

"Divil a break is it bruck, bedad! Wake up, ye joskin! Is it the loike av this ye was going to show us, Binny, me bye?"

"Bah!" cried the sport in tone of disgust. "You couldn't wake him up with a red-hot poker so long as he saw I stood ready to rub the dirt in! Drag him off to the dump, where all such foul refuse belongs!"

The two seconds seemed about to follow this fierce command, but the sport paid them no further heed, facing the crowd like one who has far more important business on hand.

Hugh Eddlong looked almost magnificent just then, and few of those who saw and heard could recall another to equal, much less surpass him.

That one flashing look, then the sport broke forth in grim warning:

"That much for foolery, gentlemen, now for sober earnest. Fair warning to ye, one and all!"

"I brand this affair as nothing better than a devilish conspiracy; a put-up job to down my friend and rob him of his property, chief among which is the Homestake Mine."

"While I'm not yet ready to call names, this much I can and will say, for your benefit. Those who are working this infernal scheme knew they couldn't get the better of the Homestake pards so long as the lads stood shoulder to shoulder, and that's why they first tried to stir up bad blood betwixt them, then—played the knife of the assassin!"

"Harry Marqueduc never cut his pard; no man who ever really knew the lad and will make use of his calm reasoning powers will for an instant think to the contrary."

"I say he is innocent. And more: I pledge you my honor that I'll ferret out

the whole truth of this sad affair and punish the guilty one, even though so doing fetches my own neck to the hangman's noose!"

"Ye mean right, sport, but you're way off; Harry cut him!" cried a voice from the crowd, to be immediately spotted by Eddlong.

"Let a younger man tell me that, Uncle, and I'll know better how to answer him," with a half-bow in reverence for those white hairs. "And even you will live long enough to apologize to the same honest lad."

"Waal, ef I see I'm in the wrong of it, sport."

A brief silence, then Headlong Hugh shook his weapons in air, face unusually pale, but big eyes glowing with vengeful light as he spoke:

"Now, one and all! Fair warning to everybody! Ye have dared, through your chosen mouthpiece, to brand my pard as a fugitive from justice, as a treacherous assassin, and placed upon his head a reward, living or dead."

"Now, hands off! You strike my pard, and you deal a blow at me. I'll defend his rights just as I might my own. I'll fight a mighty sight harder for him than I would for myself. So—hands off, or make your peace with Heaven before you strike the trail, gentlemen!"

Turning abruptly away as he spoke the final words, Headlong Hugh quickly arranged his garments, putting up his guns the while, yet never for an instant off his guard.

Although cheers greeted his grim defiance and warning combined, he knew that came more as tribute to his boldness than through sympathy for the one whose cause he had been pleading.

It was barely possible that some of those more deeply interested in the capture of Harry Marqueduc might deem this the best chance to dispose of that luckless fellow's strongest champion, either for all time or simply to down and hold fast until justice could be meted out to that criminal.

Fortunately for all concerned, no such effort was made, and when his coat was donned, Eddlong turned away, leaving the seconds to do what they might for the fallen pugilist.

Not a sound had come from Beebe's lips as yet, and rarely, indeed, had Hardpan seen a champion more thoroughly knocked out of time.

Although Owen Quinn had spoken so confidently, there were some who still clung to the belief put into words by Ginger Chump just after that marvelous fall was won, that Bulldog Ben had broken his neck.

Now that Headlong Hugh was gone, the centre of interest lay right there, the crowd flocking around and uttering suggestions without end, some of the more sensible calling for medical aid.

Now, as once before when he was needed, Dr. Branscombe responded by pushing to the front, kneeling beside the humiliated pugilist to make a careful examination.

"Is he done up fer good, Doc? Hes he done snapped his cord?" asked one of the witnesses, too impatient for the truth to calmly await those provokingly desperate movements.

"No, sir," at length came the answer. "The vertebrae is uninjured, but there may be concussion of the brain if—"

"Ketch hold, Owen!" gruffly interposed Ginger Chump. "Le's git Ben out o' all this yer ruck. Ef he hain't snapped his neck, nothin' shorter hain't gwine fer to trouble him long; no, sir!"

And thus, aided by another pal or two, Bulldog Ben was half-carried, half-dragged, off "the field of glory," but, alas, for that doughty man of fisticuffs! The glory belonged to another than his mother's son!

Leaving the crowd to discuss the affair at will, the gang took their disabled champion over to his own shanty, reaching its shelter just as Beebe began showing signs of rallying from that fall.

A groan, a stir, a husky oath, then a quickening flood of curses, which put his recovery past all doubting!

Seeing that such was the case, all save Ginger Chump and the Irishman left the shanty, curious to note what further action that court of law and order meant to take anent the Marqueduc affair.

Between whisky and water, one for the inner man while the other was used outwardly. Bulldog Ben soon rallied sufficiently to sit up to do his cursing; and drawing aside the two lesser knaves permitted him to "blow off steam" to his heart's content.

This was probably the wisest course they could have followed, for even in his demoralized state, Bulldog Ben was a dangerous case to handle, even for friends of the same kidney.

And so it came to pass that when Seneca Spottsround made it convenient to drop around at the little building, he found the ex-pugilist in a better mood for listening to arguments if not to reason than he hardly dared anticipate.

Time was too valuable to be taken up by regrets and commiserations, luckily for the capitalist. Bulldog Ben was beginning to feel the smart of defeat even worse than he did his physical injuries, and flinched viciously at the lightest touch.

Noting this Spottsround came at once to business, speaking in low and rapid but clear tones to his audience of three.

"When are you fellows going to make another try for that money? The longer he draws breath, the more dangerous he's growing; can't you see that much?"

"We did try, didn't we?" sulkily mumbled Ginger Chump. "Dicky done tried it on, didn't he?"

"And proved himself a man by so trying!" swiftly retorted the mine owner, with an impatient gesture. "And that adds another good reason why you must down that infernal sport, and down him for keeps!"

Bulldog Ben growled and showed his teeth, but his recent defeat put a brake upon his tongue, and it fell to his mates to do most of the talking.

"If you only stop to think it all over, lads; if you recall the ugly hints he let drop over yonder, and the threats he so boldly made; you can't help but see the matter in the same light I do. The sport must be downed for keeps, and the less time is lost in doing just that, the better! Let him run loose and we'll fare all the worse!"

Seneca Spottsround was in bitter earnest; never a doubt about that; but one at least of the listening trio had a word to say and said it, too!

That one was Owen Quinn, and looking squarely into that bearded visage, he spoke clearly:

"Wan minute, sor, av ye plaze. Who was it kilt Miles Rockweed, thin? Was it you, sor, or was it—yer purthy ridhidded bye Jap, sor?"

"What? What the devil do you mean by asking such infernally—"

"Foor an answer, sor, divil a less, thin," coolly cut in the Irishman, with a half-malicious grin. "Do yaz remember that bit av a hairy invintion, sor, which the same Oi picked up over beyant the spoh where that same cuttin' was afther takin' place, sor?"

"And you really think—why, you thick-headed flannel-mouth!"

"Thin it was you, sor?" persisted Owen.

"No, it wasn't; nor was it my son. Do you want me to take oath to that effect, you silly coot?" harshly demanded Seneca Spottsround.

"Augh, no, sor," Quinn hastened to disclaim. "Why would Oi, faith, whin Oi'd jist as soon take the bare worrud av ye as yer oath—an' divil a hate sooner, begorra!"

"All right. Now to solid business, lads," said the arch-schemer.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SPORT AND THE FUGITIVE.

After delivering his warning and defiance both in one, Headlong Hugh left that assembly like one who fears to trust his passions too far, going direct to the hotel, where he secured a room for future use, closely followed by his faithful pard, the Cherokee.

It was neither rest nor food that he was in quest of this time, although the Happy-go-lucky Sport was somewhat "short on sleep" just then.

From Black Dog he had learned pretty much all that he cared to know, for the present, concerning that attempted lynching and the fairly marvelous escape of the accused murderer.

He knew that Harry had found aid and comfort through the good-will of the old mountaineer, Gabriel Gannett, and that Chonesta had left him in secure hiding, somewhere near that lonely, shack.

Just now his desire was to join his young pard as quickly as might be brought to pass; but there lay the rub!

After so boldly proclaiming his full faith in the accused, and openly declaring his adherence to Marqueduc's fortunes, be those for good or for evil, could he hope to slip away from town without having spies upon his track?

Yet that was precisely what he felt constrained to do, with as brief delay as might be.

"He's got to know just how matters are turning, and understand just what line of action I'm marking out!" declared the sport, as he weighed the matter over. "I've got to see him! If not—he's just deeply enough in love with that little angel to make a break—and a bad one, too! For it'll mean hanging, sure, if he's caught anyways soon!"

Right or wrong, Eddlong reasoned it out that he would stand a better show to slip away from Hardpan unobserved while the excitement of that meeting lasted, than by waiting longer, in hopes of matters cooling down.

So it came to pass that, first bidding Black Dog play shadow no matter where he went or which way he turned, to hinder any person playing spy upon his footsteps in case he should succeed in stealing forth from town, the Happy-go-lucky Sport left the hotel and passed quietly through the streets, acting like a man without a care in life.

After making sundry turns and doubles in like fashion, Headlong Hugh struck out for the open ground below town, thinking to first make sure no one was trying to dog his course.

Little by little he veered around toward the right quarter of the compass as he failed to note aught suspicious, and no warning came from his faithful shadow; then, fairly satisfied that his ruse had succeeded, Eddlong hurried away in quest of his younger pard.

When fairly at the edge of the foothills, where but an indistinct glimpse could be caught of Hardpan itself, Hugh paused to await the coming of the Indian, Chonesta.

That did not call for an extra amount of patience, and as the Indian appeared, the sport spoke, eagerly:

"How is it, Injun? Anybody on the scent?"

"No. All fools, or blind," came the welcome response.

"Good enough! But you keep on as we've begun, Chonesta. Follow me far enough behind to make sure no one plays spy. If so—stop 'em!"

"How, brother?" asked the redskin, touching both pistol and knife, then calling attention to his ever-ready Winchester.

But Eddlong shook his head, hastily, saying in reply:

"No, no, lad; no more killing! Just stop 'em; give 'em a bluff, and send me the hint; understand?"

Black Dog nodded assent, but there came a half-frown to his bronze fore-

head, just as though he felt disappointed at not receiving a far more sanguinary license.

Feeling fairly at ease now, Headlong Hugh hurried on his way, heading as directly as practicable for the location marked out to him as the home of Old Gabe and his pretty daughter, Polly.

Nothing occurred to hinder that progress. No warning sound came from the rear, and, trusting all to Chonesta, the sport never took fear for that quarter, nor slackened pace again until he caught sight of that rudely picturesque little cabin on the hillside.

Crossing the rude bridge which spanned the little river running between its rocky banks, Eddlong called forth in briskly social tones, as he caught sight of a tall, stoop-shouldered figure near the open door of the shack:

"Hello, pardner! Glad to see ye looking so mighty plert to-day, Mr. Gannett!"

"Hellow you!" returned the mountaineer, in characteristic fashion, shading eyes with a curved palm, the better to scan and sum up this offhand visitor. "Who mought ye be, aryhow, stranger?"

The sport caught sight of a more than comely face and figure just inside the cabin door, and, tipping his new hat in that direction with easy grace, spoke again:

"Well, sir, I might tell you a lie by saying I'm an enemy to the young fellow you helped last night, but—steady, sir!"

"I hain't akeerin' fer to chin-chin 'long of a crazy critter," declared Old Gabe, over a shoulder, as he moved toward the door of his house. "An' ef you hain't crazy, ye ought to be, slingin' fool talk 'round with sech durn looseness—like that!"

"Don't yo know me, then Gannett? Why, man, dear, I'm Hugh Eddlong, the best and firmest friend Harry Marqueduc ever knew! And I'm all the way out here to see my pard, who is—"

"I know him, father," declared Polly, coming forward, as the mountaineer seemed inclined to retreat into his castle without belief.

It was not such an easy task to remove the suspicions awakened by those first words, unluckily jovial as they had been; but after Black Dog came to the rescue and vouched for the sport, all was made clear, and the glad tidings given that Harry Marqueduc was safe and sound, having both eaten and slept since his arrival.

Then, again bidding Chonesta keep a wary lookout against possible spies, Headlong Hugh begged to be shown the fugitive's retreat, which was done by Old Gabe without further protest.

That was a glad, almost joyous meeting, and if he had a single lingering doubt as to the honesty of this bluff stranger, Old Gabe was fairly convinced after witnessing that coming together of the two pards.

Then he turned away, leaving the friends together.

For a few minutes explanations were in order, but by the end of that time a tolerably clear understanding was arrived at, and the pards could enter more into details.

Having told why he had not been on deck when so sorely needed, and giving his opinion in part as to just why that death-trap was planned for his eternal keeping, Headlong Hugh spoke on.

"Of course I know that you never handled that knife, old man; even were you crazy enough to confess that you did, I'd say you was a liar!"

"As heaven hears me say it, Hugh, I never cut poor Miles!" declared the fugitive, tones husky and eyes growing dim through intense emotion.

"I know that. Only a fool or a knave would entertain the contrary even for an instant. But—who did turn the dirty trick?"

"That's what I'd give my left hand to know!"

"Can't you even make a guess, pardner?"

"And so run the risk of falsely charging an innocent man with murder; just as I have been accused? Never!"

"Well, I don't know but what you're mighty nigh in the right of it, old man," frankly acknowledged the sport. "It's bad business, even if a body is wholly innocent. And still—then you never even caught a glimpse of a fellow who might have done the cutting, Harry?"

"No. Nor do I see how any such person could possibly have done it. Surely one of us would have seen him?"

"Maybe Miles did see him, Harry?"

"No, no! Surely he wouldn't have charged me with cutting him, unless he firmly believed me the guilty one! And—heaven help me to puzzle it all out!"

"Well, I'll plug along without waiting for heaven to take the initiative, pardner," drily remarked the Happy-go-lucky Sport. "And as a starter: what about young Spottsround, lad?"

"Jasper?"

"Yes. I've heard some side-talk since striking town to the effect that he has been trying to shine up to your girl; how is it?"

"Jasper Spottsround, do you mean?"

"Of course. Mightn't he have played double, all the way 'round?"

"No, no; don't you even begin to think that way, Hugh!" earnestly spoke the fugitive, face aglow with honest vehemence. "Why, man, don't you know? Only for Jasper I'd never have cheated the rope, last night?"

"Is that right?"

"True as gospel writ, Hugh. Jasper led the mob off on a false scent, while the old man sneaked me away in grand shape. And, as for the other—that is even more foolish!"

"About the girl, you mean?"

"Yes. Jasper is going to marry Polly Gannett; you must have seen her as you passed the house?"

"I did. And a mighty neat little Polly she is, for a fact. Jasper is to be congratulated. Wish I felt honestly safe in saying the same thing about the girl he means to marry!"

"You surely may; why can't you?"

"Well, take it from another quarter: I don't just like the stock he comes from. The old man, now—"

"You think—what do you think, Hugh?"

"Heap sight more than I feel exactly safe in putting into plain speech, just now," admitted the sport, with unusual gravity for one of his light disposition. "Of course, I can't say that he really played me dirt last night, but I have my doubts; and ugly ones, too!"

What further the two pards might have spoken on that rather delicate point can only be guessed at, for just then an interruption came from without; a shrill scream from Polly Gannett, and almost in the same breath a ringing warwhoop from the lips of Black Dog, the Cherokee!

"Spied upon in spite of all, by the Eternal!" cried Hugh, swiftly leaving the cave to rush toward the scene of disturbance.

CHAPTER XXV.

TIDINGS FROM THE ENEMY.

Forgetting how important it surely was for him to keep well in the background while affairs were in such a complicated situation, Harry Marqueduc sprang after his headlong pard, the two men quickly leaving cave for the open air, and at the same time catching sight of what had caused that disturbance.

Between cabin and bridge they saw Polly Gannett struggling desperately with Black Dog, who had a man down on the broad of his back, one hand gripping throat, while its bronze mate clasped hilt of knife, the long blade of which gleamed and glittered in the sunlight, as the still screaming girl strove to foil that surely intended death-blow.

Barely long enough to take in the main

points, then the Happy-go-lucky Sport gave a stern cry, which caused a sudden change in the tableau: Chonesta flinging the knife aside, in spite of that frantic grasp, yet still holding the man beneath his grinding knees.

"Stop him!" cried Marqueduc, recognizing that overthrown person. "Don't let him hurt—he's crazy, Hugh!"

"Hold hard, Injun!"

"It's Jasper Spottsround; can't you see?" added Harry, while hurrying forward as rapidly as he knew how.

Just then Old Gabe put in an appearance, rifle in hand, coming from the hills, whither he had betaken himself on some mission shortly after the two white pards were brought together.

"Let up, thar, ye blame—durn my cats ef—git out o' the way, you!"

For Hugh just then sprung in between, his massive form effectually screening Chonesta from what might easily have proved a death-shot.

"Steady, the whole kilt an' b'iling of ye!" commanded the sport. "Let up there, Injun! Hold your fire, Gannett! Quit screaming, Polly! And what in time brought the redskin all over your back, Redhead?"

Like one who feels the matter in even better hands than his own, Chonesta shook his arm free from Polly's grasp, scrambling to his feet and standing in grim silence, yet holding himself upon the keen alert, ready to pounce upon this spy in case he should make any effort to flee or to work worse harm with knife or with gun.

Young Spottsround gasped and panted, one hand rising to caress his injured throat, while rising to his feet, an angry glare turned upon the graduate from Haskell, as he huskily spoke:

"You crazy loon! What ye trying to get through ye, anyway? What have I done to—"

"Durn a Injun, aryway!" declared Old Gabe, jaws working nervously on a huge quid of plug. "Wouldn't trust one furdher then I could eat a raw cat 'thout skinnin'!"

"Shut trap, everybody! What was it, Cherokee?" demanded the sport.

"Spy. He come on track. He try hang, last night. Now—take his scalp too mighty quick—only for squaw!"

Fiercely those first words, but with tones less hard and a half-humorous twinkle in those brilliantly black eyes, as gaze turned from man to woman.

Polly gave a little cry of indignation at these words, but, for the first time realizing how plainly she had betrayed her real sentiments before comparative strangers, the poor girl turned scarlet, then wheeled and fled.

"Injun or no Injun, that's a durn lie!" exploded Old Gabe; while Harry Marqueduc himself was swift to bear witness in the young man's favor.

All of this carried the day, and Chonesta fell further back, at a sign from the Happy-go-lucky Sport, leaving Jasper himself to explain the incident.

That took but a few moments of time.

He had been hurrying to join his friends at the mountain cabin, when Chonesta leaped upon him from cover, throwing him down before he could offer the slightest resistance.

To smooth matters over, Hugh Eddlong apologized on behalf of Black Dog, explaining that zeal away by reminding Jasper how fiercely he had cried aloud for the lynching of Harry Marqueduc the night before.

"Only to foolish the crowd," cut in the fugitive. "Only for him—only for you, Jasper, I'd be a dead man, long ago!"

"Dont mention it, Harry. I merely—and it may be that the burden is on the other side, after all!"

There was time now to take note of that unusual nervousness, all of which could hardly be laid to his recent adventures; but, ere either of the other pards could well broach the matter, young Spottsround took the plunge for himself.

With one slightly trembling hand he touched Marqueduc on an arm, looking half-appealingly into the fugitive's eyes as he spoke in lowered tones:

"Did you know, Harry—were you aware of the fact that poor Miles had sold out his share in the Homestake?"

Headlong Hugh gave a slight start at this, while Harry himself stared in wide-eyed amazement for a few seconds before making reply.

"Sold his—why, Jasper, what are you trying to get at?"

"Miles surely did sell out—"

"No! How could he? He just couldn't without my consent!"

"And you never gave that, lad?" cut in Eddlong, sharply.

"Of course I never gave it, and Miles couldn't sell without. Where did you pick up such a preposterous yarn as that, Jasper?"

"Preposterous or not, he did it, all the same," retorted Spottsrund, little eyes flashing from face to face with a bold, yet a half-covert, interest.

Just then Hugh Eddlong liked the young fellow even less than ever, but he held his peace, contented to watch and and weigh while.

"There surely is some mistake, Jasper," persisted Marqueduc. "Miles couldn't sell without my permission in writing, and that I never gave. If you heard any such foolish rumor, lad—"

"More: I have seen the papers to prove just what I'm telling you, Harry."

"The papers? Who has any paper to show all that?"

A flush crept into that freckled face, and for a moment those little blue eyes drooped; but Jasper quickly rallied, looking steadily into his friend's face to say:

"My father holds the papers, and declares that he will at once put forward his claim in the Homestake Mine."

Harry Marqueduc shrank back a pace, face growing paler, and a low, uncertain exclamation coming from his throat.

Hugh remained unmoved, so far as outward semblance went, but there was a deepening glow in his big brown eyes which boded trouble for—somebody!

"Surely you don't—you can't mean just that, Jasper?" asked Marqueduc, by a powerful effort controlling his emotions.

Young Spottsrund made a swift gesture before answering.

"I can't help it, Harry! It's solid truth. I saw the papers, and they are regular enough; no room for doubting that part of it. And father—he says he's going to stick out for his rights, too!"

"Then your father's an infernal—"

Impulsively came that outburst, but the sentence was checked before completion, as Harry instinctively glanced toward the cabin to which Polly Gannett had retreated in such haste.

"It cuts deep, Harry," muttered Jasper, hands clenching, as though he needed some vent for his more powerful feelings. "It goes to the very quick, but—I suppose you can't help feeling that way!"

"I beg your pardon, old boy," cried Marqueduc, catching a hand and wringing it ardently. "I never meant—I oughtn't to've said it, but when I heard—and you know it can't be a legal sale!"

"I know. I told father so when he spoke of his rights. I reasoned with him the very best I knew, but 'twasn't a mite of use! He showed up that bill of sale, and declared that what he had given full value for no mere technicality could rob him of."

"Which is as good as admitting that he knew his claim could not hold water," coolly offered the Happy-go-lucky Sport, as a brief silence fell over the two friends.

"That's pretty much what I told him," moodily said the younger Spottsrund, head drooping and eyes following the ice, which rolled a pebble back and forth.

"And what did he say to that, Jap?" asked Old Gabe, interestedly.

"That he'd maintain his claim was

good until some smarter man came along to prove it invalid. Oh," with a fierce gesture which betrayed in part the real emotions which he strove so doggedly to mask and hold in stern subjection.

"I'd rather kick myself with a mule than to talk this way, gentlemen, but what better can I do? I know my father is in the wrong; I know that his conduct in this matter can hardly be called fair or—or honest!"

"Let it drop for now, Jasper. You're hardly fit to—"

"No, no, I can't let it drop without—now I've started, let me tell all I know about it, Harry. Once dropped, I couldn't pick it up again; I just couldn't!"

"What does your father intend doing, first-off?" asked the sport, thinking it wisest to spur the young man on somewhat faster.

"That's what I've hurried out here to tell you, Harry. Father says he means to take possession of the Homestake this very day, and hold the workings until—until you come forward to dispute possession!"

Harry Marqueduc gave another start at this announcement, his face flushing hotly, only to fade again into still more pronounced pallor.

He knew that while that ban lasted he dared not show face in or about Hardpan. To do so would be equivalent to death by the rope!

Others knew this fully as well, and with an undisguised sneer in tones as upon face, Headlong Hugh spoke to young Spottsrund:

"Indeed! Well, sir, to a man up a tree that looks as though your more or less respected daddy was an in—"

Just then came a startling interruption.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FRESH TROUBLE BREWING.

With that single exception, Old Gabe Gannett had stood silently by through all this talk, though eager enough to get at the bottom facts, if full dependence could be placed in his varying expression.

But in spite of that deep interest, his life-long habits were too strong to be entirely overridden, and catching sight of something which he knew portended danger to at least one of those present, he gave a low exclamation, at the same time throwing up his Winchester and firing a shot the next instant.

That little group scattered much as though a bomb had been cast into their midst, each man instinctively feeling for a weapon, while flashing looks around and speaking as a single tongue:

"What is it? What you shooting at?"

Old Gabe ducked head and swayed swiftly to one side in order to see past that puff of spreading smoke; then rose up with a fierce snarl of disappointment to speak:

"Missed him, by glory! Jest hed a glimp' o' somethin' shiny, an' then tuck a—ketch him, Injun!"

Black Dog was already in motion, taking cue from the direction indicated by that barking gun, his own Winchester trailing in right hand as he ran, ready for a swift and more effective shot should the fair chance offer itself.

"Where? Who was it? Which way—speak out, man!" sternly cried the Headlong Sport.

"Over the crick. Them rocks which—right by the broke-top pine, yender!" as hurriedly explained the mountaineer, and then the four set off at full speed, eager to learn the whole truth.

Unfortunately for them, the banks of the little river were too steep and dangerous for speedy scaling either way, while the point indicated by Old Gabe was on the further side, and a considerable distance below the rude bridge which spanned the stream.

Briskly as they moved and vigorous though their efforts were, it consumed several precious minutes to reach the bridge, cross over, and then pick their

way through those thick lying rocks and scrubby shrubbery to win the point in question.

And some little time before that was won the quartette realized their efforts were in vain, so far as capturing the spy was concerned.

Black Dog was far ahead of them, running true as hound on breast-high scent; but he, also, failed to find what he sought in that scanty covert, and, as he gave one partly subdued whoop, flourishing his rifle over head and making a swift gesture toward his white pard, each man knew that Old Gabe's shot had missed its mark, and that the spy had betaken himself to headlong flight lest worse befall.

Still, they pushed on, in spite of that fact, losing sight of Black Dog an instant later.

"Right hyar; by the broke-top pine, which—I knowed it!" cried Old Gabe, his keen eyes being first of all to sight another proof.

He caught up an article which for the instant puzzled them all, it had been so beaten out of shape by that heavy bullet sped from the Winchester; but then Headlong Hugh recognized its former use.

"A spyglass!"

And so it proved to be. Bent and shattered by that bullet, suffering still further when it fell or was flung down by hand of the startled spy.

"Look for sign!" added the sport, as he set the example himself. "If that was trained on us, the whelp must have been marked too deeply for lying out of it, if not crippled—"

"Waal, I don't reckon that way," cut in Old Gabe in a tone of regret. "I jest ketched glimp' of it as 'twas movin'; the sun showed on the glass, an' so—reckon the critter was jest shettin' of it up fer to go away. See?"

Whether that explanation was the correct one or not, the fact remained that not a solitary drop of blood could be found, while the nature of the soil at that particular point rendered any effort at reading print of foot altogether out of the question.

"Who do you reckon it could have been?" asked Marqueduc, after a few minutes spent in vain search of that immediate vicinity.

"And what was the fellow doing, anyway?" added young Spottsrund.

Headlong Hugh shrugged his shoulders after his significant manner before essaying an answer to either friend.

"You say, Harry; for I can't more than guess the first."

"Guess it, then, pardner."

"I don't have to. As for you, Spottsrund; that's dead easy, too blamed easy for my liking, anyway!"

"How so, sir?"

"Playing spy, of course. And now he's gone, hot-foot, to tote his infernal news to those who sent his out this way."

"You mean—"

"That the whelp spotted Harry Marqueduc, and now has gone for help to run him in! What for, I reckon you can give a fair guess, unless you've forgotten all that took place over at Hardpan last night!"

Headlong Hugh spoke harshly, with unwonted bitterness for a man of his disposition, and every look, word, and gesture went to show how deeply his uneasiness had been stirred by this unfortunate happening.

"Curse the crooked luck anyway!" he muttered, staring from beneath lowered eyebrows in the direction that spy must have taken. "If you hadn't called us out just then—"

"Don't cast blame wrongfully, old pard," cut in Marqueduc, hastily, as he saw Jasper flinch a bit. "As for taking me, well, I'll meet 'em when they come, for I'm tired of this skulking like a guilty cur! I never harmed poor Miles, and I'll die in my tracks before I—"

"Steady, lad!" warned Headlong Hugh, one hand flying forth to slip over

those passionately moving lips. "We know you never stabbed Rockweed, but we also know that looks are against you, and so—"

"I'll fight it out right here and right now, all the same," declared the fugitive sternly, once more with lips free.

"And I wouldn't ask for any better fun than to join right in with you on that play, pardner," declared the Happy-go-lucky Sport, "but it'd mean a dead-sure yank at the wrong end of the rope for you, old boy!"

"Better die white than live a cur, though!"

"And heap sight better live like a white man, Harry," cut in Jasper Spottsround.

"Now thar's a critter as kin talk sense!" declared Old Gabe.

His manner, more than the words themselves, brought a brief laugh to Marqueduc's lips, and Headlong Hugh was swift to take full advantage of the opening.

"He's in the right of it, lad. Two men can't fight and hope to whip an entire town the size of Hardpan. Of course, we could make it mighty interesting while we lasted, but that wouldn't be long enough to rot the rope they've got knotted for your precious thrapple."

"Well, what do you wish me to do, then?" almost surlily asked the hunted miner.

"Wait a bit. Maybe it isn't quite as ugly as we fancy. If Black Dog only catches that infernal—"

"No use! See, yonder he comes, now!"

Marqueduc was first to sight the red-skin coming their way from out the mingled stones and bushes, and even as he spoke, Chonesta made a gesture which Headlong Hugh found no difficulty in interpreting.

"You're right, lad; he's lost the whelp, for a fact!"

Nothing more was said by either of the men until Black Dog came near, then his white pard asked:

"Did you catch your game, Injun?"

A negative shake of the head made reply.

"You sighted him, though, didn't you?"

"Yes. He run fast, like bad skeered. Down there he have horse waiting in bushes."

"Took to the saddle, did he?"

Black Dog nodded, gloomily. Past doubting he was sorely disappointed at having nothing better to show for his chase.

"Which way did he go, Cherokee?"

"That way," with a motion of hand. "Pritty nigh to town, now. Run like crazy—ride hoss like devil!"

"Who was it; could you make that out?"

Chonesta shook his head, then handled his weapon significantly as he spoke once more.

"No. Ketch hoss too quick. Black Dog go find out, brother?"

"No, no, Injun!" hurriedly checked the sport as Black Dog turned to face Hardpan, eager to take up that dangerous quest. "You keep an eye open for fresh trouble until we can fairly decide just what to do."

Turning toward his young pard, Eddlong gripped a hand firmly, gazing into those dark eyes while speaking, swiftly, earnestly:

"It's just like this, Harry. You can't stop longer here, now those hounds have caught your scent. It'll mean hemp-pulling for you to try it on, can't you see that?"

"What do you wish me to do, then, Hugh?"

"To levant, rack out, skip the country, and lay low in safer quarters until all this nasty smell can pass away!"

"You mean it all for the best, Hugh," slowly spoke the falsely accused, returning that kindly pressure as he spoke. "But you're wrong when you ask me to play the cur any longer."

"I'm right, Harry, and in your heart you know it! It's not playing the cur to wait for at least half a chance for your life, old boy. It's simply common sense, and of that you used to tote a sufficiency."

Marqueduc shook his head again, but the sport paid no heed.

"I tell you that's just the way it's got to work, lad! With you in double danger here, none of us can do ourselves justice. With you out of reach for a little, your friends can work with double energy and ten-fold show for coming out on top of the heap. So—"

"It's no use your arguing that way, pardner," declared Harry, casting a quick look around, then leaning closer to add in a whisper: "I'll never go until I've seen and spoken with Milly Fickeson, Hugh!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE VIGILANTES OF HARDPAN.

That spy was none other than Owen Quinn, son of the Emerald Isle, and that betraying glass was struck by the mountaineer's bullet just as it was being lowered from an evilly glittering eye.

Although without material injury, Owen was one of the worst frightened varlets in seventeen States, turning away from his lookout and taking to flight with a muffled howl and call upon all the saints to look down in pity upon his mother's son.

There was precious little opportunity for a blade of grass to add to its dimensions while under one of those hot-hurrying feet, and so it came to pass that Quinn reached his waiting nag, leaped into saddle, and bounded off toward Hardpan before Black Dog could fairly recognize him, or get a chance to make better use of his Winchester.

Owen never relaxed his efforts for an instant until cooling reason told him he had completely distanced his enemies, and while the fellow was no greater coward than the usual run of such mercenaries, he was fairly at the edge of Hardpan ere he felt himself again.

Making a bit of a turn in order to drop his mount at a shed near Bulldog Ben's cabin, and so avoid calling attention his way, which might prove inconvenient to both himself and employer, the Irishman lost as little time as might be in turning the information won to the best account.

Fortune favored Owen so far; he quickly found Seneca Spottsround, and the next minute was pouring forth his important news.

He told how he acted upon suspicions formed by the part played in that foiled lynching the night before Jasper and Old Gabe, then spoke of his marvelously narrow escape of but a brief space before.

"Faith, sor, an' that ought to be worth a few dollars ixthry, now! Av Oi wor putt an me boible oath, sor, 'tisn't me w'u'd take the same chances av winnin' glory in a howly hurry like Oi did that same; no, not foor the Homestake an' ahl there is in it, begorra!"

"Who was it shot at you? Who did you see down there?" impatiently demanded the capitalist, though he had a strong suspicion of the truth as matters now stood.

"That divil av an awld joskin, no less! An'—see, is it, sor? Av Oi didn't see that same bloody murtherer, Harry Marqueduc—"

"You are positive? There is no room for mistakes? Out with it in a lump, you slow-drawler!"

"Oi am thin! He wor there! An' so wor that rid-hidded divil av a bye that's your own belongings, faith!" fairly exploded the spy; but the latter portion of his report was spent on vacant air.

Seneca Spottsround whirled around and strode away at a pace so unusually vigorous that it might almost be called a run.

For the moment he cared naught for his usual dignity. He was playing a bold game for unusually high stakes, and just now realized how very important prompt action was, from his standpoint.

But that suddenly fierce mood seemed to undergo an abrupt change, and slackening his pace, Spottsround "hung in the air" for a moment or two, ending by turning and making a gesture which caught the eye of his henchman.

"Faith, sor, ye're hoppin' this way an' that, sor, loike an onaasy flee on a hot griddle, wid a hoongry birrd watchin' to grab, sor!"

"That's all right, Quinn. Never you borrow trouble on my account. I thought I'd carry the news to those in waiting, but now I reckon 'twould be better for you to tell your own story. Come!"

"Where, sor?"

"To the vigilantes, of course; come!"

"Av Oi do Oi will, but Oi won't thin!" spluttered Owen, hanging back as Spottsround closed impatient hand on arm. "Sure, sor, Oi haven't done anything which—"

"Are you all fool, Quinn? It's a reward you'll get, nothing worse! Didn't you hear what was said about pay for taking Harry Marqueduc, either dead or alive?"

That seemed to put matters in a vastly different light, and Owen no longer showed reluctance to meet the members of the law and order party, whose present object seemed to be the avenging of Miles Rockweed's murder.

Although the force of vigilantes could hardly be said to have a full and fair organization as yet, a number of those more strongly interested were found in consultation, and, after listening to the report brought in by Owen Quinn, action was promptly taken.

Word was spread throughout Hardpan, and recruits bidden rendezvous at the spot where the recent open-air court had been held, armed, and as many as could, with mounts.

All this without Seneca Spottsround taking any more prominent part in the business than to see Owen Quinn come to the front; but when the rallying of armed forces was fairly under way, the mine owner showed himself prominently enough to make sure of an invitation to bear them company in quest of the fugitive assassin.

The capitalist shook his head soberly before speaking out:

"No, gentlemen, you really must excuse me. Not that I am opposed to the principles you represent; I claim that law and order must rule, no matter who suffers by that exercise of justice; but just now—you really must excuse me!"

"Why so? You ought to hold up your end like all the rest of us."

"Not this time, please. My skin is not extra thin, but were I to take a prominent part in this hunt, what would be said? That I wanted to get Harry Marqueduc out of the way, simply because I hold a bill of sale to the Homestake Mine, given me for value received, by one who swore he had bought out his former partner."

"Do you mean just that?"

"Every word of it, friend. And I firmly believe that Marqueduc killed Rockweed because of that legal transfer, too!"

Like one who hardly cared to delay justice by any further exposition of his private affairs, Seneca Spottsround turned away, leaving his friends to chew upon another rare morsel, for the time being.

With little expectation of finding any serious trouble in taking their human game in case it had not fled to still more secure hiding, the vigilante leaders only waited to collect a score of members, then started at a brisk pace out of Hardpan, heading for the mountain shack by the shortest practicable route.

As nearly all of the party rode horses, while the route itself was scarcely long

enough to break down an active man in fair training, the full force kept tolerably well together, while making more than average time, and fully half their number caught sight of the Gannett domicile at the same moment.

"Look! They haven't all jumped the country, anyway!" called out one of the party, pointing to still further make his meaning clear.

Lounging in front of the cabin were several men, seemingly at ease with life and all their surroundings, and then a second voice made itself heard above that muttering of interest.

"One of 'em's the sport! See?"

"But where's Marqueduc? Gone, for rocks!"

"Well, he can't go so far but what we can find him, I reckon," exploded Mayor Strong, touching his horse with spur and riding rapidly forward now that cover was fairly broken.

Crossing the river at the bridge, the vigilantes soon drew rein before the cabin, Mayor Strong speaking, curtly:

"How d'y, gents! Whar's Marqueduc?"

Hugh Eddlong looked half-quizzically into that face for a moment, then parted jaws in a long, lazy yawn before speaking, even more briefly:

"You tell, Jimmy!"

"He was here, and—"

"So was last Christmas, but that's gone; and so has Harry Marqueduc—lucky for some of your party, too!"

"Do you deny that he has been here, then, sir?"

"Who says he was here?"

"Why do you ask that, if he wasn't?"

"Well, for one thing, I do love to gaze upon a liar!" mocked the Happy-go-lucky Sport. "And that's partly why your beautiful mug always holds such a powerful attraction for my eyes, Jimmy!"

The leader of the vigilance committee frowned at this quip, but suspecting a play for time under it all, he swung himself from saddle to earth.

"That's all right, sir, if you can only make it seem right when pay-day rolls 'round again! Meanwhile—we're going to look for ourselves without bothering you any further," the Mayor asserted.

Hugh rose leisurely to his feet, giving himself a shake as though to settle his muscular limbs, then spoke again:

"What are you going to do, Jim Strong?"

"Going to make a search of this place. We know that Harry Marqueduc has been here only a few hours ago and we mean to—"

"Go easy, my dear fellow!" smoothly urged the sport, by a slight movement barring further passage without an actual collision.

"Careful, you! Are you going to resist our legal authority, sir?"

"Your—what?"

"That's all right, Eddlong," hand resting dangerously near the butt of a revolver. "We've come out here for Marqueduc. We're going to have him, if he is to be found. Now, I'm going to begin the search, you understand?"

"Oh, is that the way of it? Well, that's all right, Jimmy. Only I do hope you all know how to pray, gentlemen!"

"How to—what's that got to do with it?"

"Because you'd better begin praying right now that you'll not find the sort of game you're looking for," coolly assured the sport.

"How so?"

"Well, Jimmy, seeing it's you, I'll give you fair and friendly warning in advance, and that runs like this: If you should stumble on my pard, and try to take him, dead or alive, as your reward says, I'll kill half your gang to my lonesome—then die a-laughing to watch the rest o' you break your fool necks trying to run away!"

"Bah! You're wild, man!" angrily cried the Chief of Vigilantes.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SPORT MAKES AN EVENING CALL.

The two men stood face to face, each one a fair representative of his particular class.

"All right, if you only think I'm foolish, Jim Strong."

"That don't worry me in the least, Eddlong. We're hunting for Harry Marqueduc. If he's here, as we know he was a short time ago, we're going to find him. If we find him, we'll take him, too!"

"Do you really mean all that, Jimmy?"

"You bet we do mean it; and more—if you try to make us trouble, Eddlong, we'll either subdue or kill you!"

The Happy-go-lucky Sport laughed carelessly at this grim threat, never looking more completely at ease in mind as he slouched aside, leaving a clear passage to the cabin, at the same time adding:

"All right, gentlemen. It's a fair warning on both sides. Now, go on with your rat-killing!"

Not one of the others present had spoken since the coming of the Vigilantes, but now, as the exponents of law and order moved upon his humble home, Old Gabe jeeringly said:

"Don't steal anything more'n ye kin hide into the pockets of ye, gents! Fer I haven't hed a fa'r pop at a thief fer so long that—"

"Button that lip, Gannett, or maybe you'll git popped all over!" an irritated Vigilante made sour retort.

As a matter of course, it did not take very many minutes to assure the man-hunters that he whom they sought was neither in nor immediately about that small building, and then they turned their attention toward other quarters.

To do them simple justice, not one of the party slighted his work, so far as could be seen, but hunted with a firm resolve to find, if such luck lay within the bounds of possibility, in spite of the grimly pleasant threats made by the Happy-go-lucky Sport.

Possibly they believed that Eddlong was merely running a bluff, and that he would think twice before coming to actual blows in case the fugitive should be unearthed.

Fortunately for all concerned, this did not occur, and so the question remained unanswered for the time being.

The search was so thorough that the little cave in which Harry Marqueduc had spent the majority of the hours since his cleverly contrived escape from the lynchers was found, greatly to the surprise of those composing the party of man-hunters.

Not one of them had known of such a snug retreat before this, and that discovery served to make them all the more eager on the scent.

But only disappointment rewarded their efforts, and finally even Jim Strong, mayor and Chief of Vigilantes, gave over in sullen despair.

Again he strove to win a clew to the fugitive's movements through questioning the party, but totally without success.

Old Gabe insisted on covertly scanning each member's pockets, like one might who more than suspected sly thievery.

Black Dog stood superbly cold and unresponsive, arms folded in front of his stalwart person, yet with hands drooping low enough to be very nigh butt of pistol and haft of knife.

And Headlong Hugh? Full to overflowing with quip and crank, turning all to jest, now good-humoredly, then with a barb that rankled like a poison-tipped arrow.

As for Polly Gannett, she kept well screened from view, as a rule, and there was nothing to be seen of Jasper Spottsround.

He had been reported as present by Owen Quinn when the spy made his report before the Vigilance Committee, but naught had been seen of him since their coming to the mountain shack.

Recalling this fact, when his other re-

sources seemed exhausted, the chief bluntly asked Eddlong where the young fellow was, then.

"Any other men you've lost, dear fellow? If so, just lump 'em in a bunch and sling their names at me; do!"

"Will you tell me, then?"

"Haven't I already told you? It's all I can do to keep tab on my mother's son without worrying o' nights over other kids. So—hope you'll survive the double disappointment, old man!"

"I'll live long enough to see you sup bitter sorrow for playing the fool—or is it knave?"

Happy-go-lucky, Hugh laughed outright at this blunt query. Just then he felt that he could well afford to take as well as give, and he showed no resentment at that insinuation.

"Well, Jimmy, I don't know a man living who ought to be a better judge as to that than—shall I hold a mirror up to the original?"

In spite of his fierce disappointment Strong could not quite control his facial muscles, and Eddlong laughed anew as he caught that brief-lived smile.

"Ah, Jimmy, lad! you're not half as nasty as you've been trying to make out. You wouldn't hang a sick kitten on such evidence as can be brought against Harry Marqueduc; and you know it!"

"I know that I'll hang him higher than Gilderoy's kite if I ever have the luck to clap eyes upon your pard!" harshly, retorted the mayor, as he sprang into saddle and turned faced in the direction of the bridge spanning that little river.

His men likewise got under way, but Headlong Hugh was not quite ready to bid the party good-by, moving along in their company, on foot.

"That's all right, gentlemen. You feel sore over it, right now, but the day's coming 'round when every one of you will give me thanks for standing in the way of a—call it judicial murder, then!"

No response was made to these words, unless it was by looks. They certainly showed slight indications in the direction hinted at by the Happy-go-lucky Sport.

"I say, Mr. Strong!" called out Eddlong as the bridge was neared.

"What is it, then?"

"Will you take a message from me to Hardpan?"

"Who for?"

"Seneca Spottsround. Tell him that if he is the wise man people ordinarily give him credit for, he'll keep his hands off the Homestake Mine until this business is fairly and honestly settled."

"That is his business, I reckon!"

"He don't want to run away with that notion, though, Jimmy. You tell him I said so, will you, please?"

"All right. I'll tell him. Anything else? You've been so infernally accommodating, and obliging, and polite, and—all that—ever since we rode up, that I'm actually dying to do you good!"

"Thanks, awfully! I'll try to dream of you to-night, Jimmy! And now—oh, I say, sweetheart!"

"Say it, then, confound you!" growlingly answered the mayor, flushing warmly as a number of his men failed to quite smother their amusement over that good-natured baiting.

"Just this: Please tell Seneca Spottsround to remain at home this evening, as I mean to call there. Important business, tell him. You will?"

"All right! Come on, lads, or he'll talk all the ears off o' the whole crowd!"

The Vigilantes crossed the bridge and rode briskly away; and just as they vanished from view of the man who leaned easily, lazily there on one of the rude hand-rails, a wet and water-dripping head and face of human being showed itself near a grass-fringed ledge of rock!

And that face belonged to Harry Marqueduc!

The shades of evening were well descended over Hardpan when a couple of

light-stepping men came out of those foothills and moved silently across the more level ground, heading not only for the town itself, but for the house under whose roof-tree the Spottsrounds resided.

Although the moon had not yet come into sight, the air was so clear and the stars sparkling so brightly that it was by no means a difficult matter to distinguish between the twain; one was surely Headlong Hugh, the Happy-go-lucky Sport, while that bronzed skin and beard-free face just as certainly indicated his Haskell pard, Black Dog, the Cherokee.

Neither man spoke while making their way through that scattered portion of the town, and now, as seemed to be his rule, Chonesta kept a slight distance to the rear of his white brother.

"Here we are at last!" finally exclaimed the sport, in subdued tones, as he paused in front of the building. "You haven't forgotten all I told you, Injun?"

"I know. You can trust me."

"All right. If there's any bobbery—but there mustn't be! Now, we'll see if Jim Strong delivered my message, and if the old man thought it worth while to pay heed!"

Lifting hand as he moved a bit closer, the sport rapped sharply on a panel, when the barrier swung open with almost startling celerity, thus proving that some one surely had been in wait.

And a moment later Headlong Hugh recognized that person as—

"You, Milly!" he ejaculated, at the same time stepping over the threshold and gently, pushing the blushing maiden back to make room.

A swift whisper dropped from his lips, although the next instant showed him the figure of Mr. Spottsround just emerging from a room which opened directly off the fairly wide hall.

The proprietor was frowning perceptibly as he caught sight of that athletic figure, but Headlong Hugh smiled blandly, pushing hat back with careless ease as he genially saluted:

"Good-evening, Mr. Spottsround; delighted to find you at home, and still more pleased to see you looking so monstrously chipper, sir!"

"You sent me word that you intended calling, didn't you, sir?" almost harshly demanded the capitalist.

"By Jimmy Strong; yes! Then the fellow did have manners enough to leave my word? I just wanted to—step inside, Chonesta. You can wait here, for I'll not be very long."

The bronzed follower silently complied, and the Happy-go-lucky Sport moved toward the host, speaking easily the while:

"A few words with you in private, please, Mr. Spottsround."

"Very well, sir. Come to my office, right back here," stiffly spoke the mine-owner, turning and leading the way into that side-room.

And the instant they vanished Chonesta caught Milly in his arms!

CHAPTER XXIX.

CLAIMING THE HOMESTAKE.

That very interesting spectacle escaped the eyes of Milly's guardian, and as no scream of alarm or of indignation penetrated that far, the door of the little home-office was closed behind the two men, with Seneca Spottsround still in a state of (more or less) blissful ignorance.

A comfortably furnished, snugly arranged place it was, as Headlong Hugh was fain to acknowledge as he glanced quickly, curiously around, when once within that apartment.

Books, a writing desk and table combined, a small but substantial safe in one corner, the usual complement of chairs, and other conveniences.

Although rather noted for his affability as a rule, just now the capitalist showed little courtesy in either manner or speech, turning when near his desk to give curt nod toward a chair, then speaking:

"Help yourself. Now—you sent me word that you wanted to see me on business, I believe?"

"That's right, my dear fellow," came the easy response, as Headlong Hugh picked out the most comfortable-looking chair, to drop into it, only pushing back the leaf of his new hat, to leave eyes unshaded.

"Well, what is it?"

"About the Homestake Mine, of course. You claim—"

"Nothing more than my legal rights, sir."

"Is that so?"

"That is so!"

"Then of course there is no use in my trying to say anything, is there?" asked the sport, with bare-faced innocence.

Seneca Spottsround flushed a bit at this, feeling it more keenly than he would harshest insolence; and noting this fact, the Happy-go-lucky Sport added, in altered tones:

"Sit down, Mr. Spottsround. This is hardly a matter which can be settled by a dozen words, or even by the unsupported dictum of a gentleman as 'way-up in life and business as all Hardpan recognizes you to be. Sit down, or—shall I stand up?"

Eddlong rose to his feet as these words crossed his lips, but he remained standing barely a score seconds.

The mine-owner flushed and frowned, hands instinctively clenching; but then he yielded so far as to take a chair, whereupon the sport resumed his seat.

"That's a little bit more like it," he coolly quoth, as one leg crossed and hat came off to cover a knee. "I always did like to make a man feel at home, you understand?"

"Especially in his own house? How remarkably kind of you, sir!"

"Don't mention it, pray; 'tis merely a little way I've got."

A brief pause, then the mine-owner spoke again:

"About this business, sir; will it be too much to ask you to come to the point as quickly as may be?"

"Not at all. The mayor led a few gentlemen out my way this afternoon, on a little trip for exercise, and something happened to be let drop which—"

"About my claiming the Homestake property?" cut in Spottsround, with an impatient gesture. "Come to the point, please!"

"Yes. You really mean to put forward such a claim, then?"

"I have already done so."

"On what grounds?"

"That of ownership, of course."

"Indeed! Then your name is Harry Marqueduc?"

"My name is—what do you mean by that, sir?"

"Just this. The Homestake Mine belonged to two pards. One of them died, which left all to his mate. And that owner now is my pard, Harry Marqueduc. Is that plainly stated, sir?"

Headlong Hugh spoke with almost painful distinctness, but his words made not the slightest impression upon his present adversary.

Cool and composed, Seneca Spottsround waited until he ceased speaking, then made cold reply.

"More plain than truthful, Mr. Eddlong."

"Then I'm a liar, is it?"

"A man may put forward a mistaken statement without the slightest intention of saying what lacks foundation on truth, remember," coldly explained the capitalist, with just the ghost of a smile coming into his face. "And just now you are seriously mistaken, Mr. Eddlong."

"In just what way?"

"Like this: Miles Rockweed came into full ownership of the Homestake Mine, either by purchasing or winning the share which his partner originally held."

"You say it?"

"And I mean it all, sir. Then I bought

the entire property from Miles Rockweed, as I have all the documents necessary, to show to those who may demand a sight—after a proper manner, of course."

Seneca Spottsround uttered these words with all the coolness of a man who knows his position is impregnable; but the Happy-go-lucky Sport was not so readily satisfied.

"As a man of business, Mr. Spottsround, you are perfectly satisfied with your bargain?" he asked, easily.

"Else I should never have gone into the speculation; yes, sir."

"And you have all the papers essential? Nothing lacking?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then, of course, you hold the written consent given by Harry Marqueduc to that transfer?"

As he asked this question, Hugh leaned forward as though curious to note the effect of his shot. But his adversary showed no signs of either annoyance or discomfiture, even smiling more pronouncedly as he made reply:

"What has that got to do with me, pray?"

"You forget that—"

"I forget nothing, sir. In securing the Homestake property, I was dealing with the sole owner. The fact of that transfer is ample proof that I had won the full consent of the only other being interested in the affair."

"Except Harry Marqueduc, you mean!"

"I mean precisely what I say; neither more nor less. Marqueduc has not had anything whatever to do with that transfer. He went out of the property before I entered into a bargain with Miles Rockweed."

"He says not, and says it most decidedly, too!"

Seneca Spottsround shrugged shoulders at this blunt statement.

"To whom has Mr. Marqueduc made that statement, pray?"

"To me, for one; and there are others!"

"Of course you are not so much to blame for placing credence in the words of one whom you have called your friend—"

"A thorough gentleman, sir, and one whom I am more than proud to call my friend in the face of the whole world!"

"Very well. That is a matter with which I have naught to do. As for the other affair, just this," tapping finger on palm, as though to lend emphasis to his words.

"I can prove my right and title to the Homestake Mine. If Harry Marqueduc denies that right, both moral and legal, let him come to the front and do so in his own proper person!"

"When your crowd of whoopers-up would lynch him, is it?"

"That's his lookout, not mine, Mr. Eddlong. Business is business, as I scarcely need remind a gentleman of your age and experience, and if your friend is innocent—"

"I say he is just that, sir!" flashed the Happy-go-lucky Sport, for the moment losing temper before that cold, sneering demeanor. "Do you deny it?"

The capitalist smiled and bowed, one white-fingered hand going out in a deprecatory gesture.

"Excuse me, please, my dear sir. I am not a professional fire-eater, nor do I make it an every-day practice insulting guests beneath my own roof-tree. So you really must excuse me, sir!"

There was such a delicious coolness in all this—such an adroit method of conveying his actual sentiments under guise of a polite refusal to make them known—that in spite of himself and the cause he was advocating, Headlong Hugh could not entirely suppress a half-smile.

"Well, Mr. Spottsround, you'll never be hanged for lack of an excuse to slip the noose upon some other neck," he said, with grim pleasantry.

"Thanks!"

"No trouble in life, sir, so don't mention it! And now: If Harry Marqueduc holds certain scruples against coming to the front just now, he has furnished a substitute with full powers to act."

"Meaning yourself, I presume, Mr. Eddlong?"

"That's right! And as my first step, let me give you fair warning to keep all hands off the Homestake property. Your claims are denied, in toto, and if necessary we'll fight you at the pistol's muzzle!"

Seneca Spottsrond rose to his feet, face coldly grave and tones as steady as fate when next he spoke.

"Have you anything further to offer, Mr. Eddlong?"

"Whole gobs of it! Unless you flatly back down from the position you have so strangely assumed, sir."

"And brand myself liar, swindler, fraud in general?"

"Oh, we'll let you off lighter than that, my dear fellow!"

Spottsrond smiled faintly, bowing in sarcasm.

"You're too kind, much too kind, my dear sir! As for backing down, I have nothing to retract or to alter in the slightest degree. I know my rights, and stand ready to defend them against all who dare dispute my claims."

"Do you really mean all that, sir?"

"Every word of it. But I'll debate the matter no longer, here. At any other time or place—that will be different!"

"All right. Call it to-morrow, and at the Homestake?"

"I expect to be there, to look after my interests; yes."

Mr. Spottsrond crossed the room to fling open the door leading into the hall, and taking the hint, Headlong Hugh followed his host. And as they stepped forth, there stood Black Dog by the other door, silent and alone!

CHAPTER XXX.

BY THE SKIN OF THEIR TEETH.

There was nothing to be seen of Milly Fickeson, and to all appearances the Cherokee had been waiting the end of that business interview in solitude.

Hugh Eddlong flashed one keen glance around, then turned toward the capitalist to add:

"All right, my dear fellow. We'll meet over at the Homestake, to-morrow. Is that the way of it?"

"It is more than likely that business will call me there; yes, sir," came the cold response.

"If you're in the neighborhood I'll rout you out; never you doubt that for an instant, pardner; So, good-night! Dream over your riches while you have the chance, Mr. Spottsrond!"

"Is that meant for a threat, sir?"

"I never quarrel with a gentleman—under his own roof-tree," declared the Happy-go-lucky Sport with a half-bow and whole grin.

"Come, Injun!" he said, turning toward the exit. "Reckon we'll pucker for now. Pick up your heels and walk, Black Dog!"

The two pards left the house, and Seneca Spottsrond slammed the door behind them, much as though he was pronouncing a sonorous "wooden damn" by way of malison.

Both pards maintained silence while near the house, walking briskly, as though eager to quit its neighborhood.

Eddlong was not quite ready to divulge what passed between himself and the capitalist during that not very protracted interview, while the redskin apparently had other food for thought.

They were striding along in utter silence, each busy with his own reflections, when a startling interruption came.

A dark figure sprang from the wayside, making a swift gesture as it came. "Look out!" cried the redskin, sharply.

For with that sudden appearance and

gesture, something came whizzing through the air, leaving a trail of spitting sparks upon the night, then striking squarely against the broad breast of the Happy-go-lucky Sport.

Swift as thought itself Black Dog made a grasp—by wonderful luck actually catching the fiery missile as it rebounded, and hurling it away with lightning quickness.

Not even the part of a second too quickly, either, for, as the missile left his hands—almost before it could fairly leave them, it seemed—a tremendous explosion took place, throwing the two pards to earth, sending them sprawling and rolling away, separated, and neither knowing what evil might have befallen his mate.

There followed a slighter crash; the tumbling of boards and timbers where a shanty was completely wrecked by that exploding bomb, for such the fiery missile surely must have been!

The entire town seemed fairly shaken up by that explosion, and the lumbering sound itself had not time to die entirely away before other sounds came to fill its place; shouts and cries, shrieks and screams of feminine terror.

The pards were partially stunned by the explosion and fall combined, the wind fairly driven out of them for the moment.

Headlong Hugh was first to rally, scrambling to his feet and dashing hand across his dust-blinded eyes as he roared forth something; a call to his pard, no doubt.

So Chonesta evidently interpreted that bellow, for he made answer while dizzily climbing to his feet:

"Here—all right, and—you, Eddlong?"

"Sound enough, only for—what the devil was it, anyway?"

"Dynamite, by the smell, I just caught sight of—"

"I know! I saw the sparks, and was hit—the dirty devil! Which way did he go?"

The enraged sport, now beginning to realize what a dastardly attempt upon their lives had been made, gripped revolver and brushed hand over eyes to clear his vision, while glaring around in quest of the vile assassin.

But nothing like a man caught his sight, and Black Dog, gripping an arm, in low tones called attention to those nearing sounds.

"They're coming this way, Hugh! If we don't want to—"

With marvelous rapidity the Happy-go-lucky Sport regained something of his usual coolness, and gripping arm in turn he spoke swiftly:

"We'd run right into rather than away from them, Black Dog. And that might lead to their mistaking us for the rascally cur who—steady!"

Half-wild with excitement and curiosity combined, scores of citizens were now afoot, flocking toward the quarter from whence that startling sound came.

Already the two pards were hemmed in, and making a virtue of necessity, Headlong Hugh raised his voice in a sonorous shout:

"This way, all! Stop and hold any devil you find sneaking in the other direction, men of Hardpan!"

With that voice to guide them, only a few seconds elapsed ere the foremost of that startled crowd came to the scene, asking questions and uttering cries of indignant amaze as they looked upon the ruin caused by that miscreant's missile.

Its whole force had centered upon a building directly opposite the point to which the pards had attained when the bomb or cartridge was hurled at Headlong Hugh.

The house was ruined past redemption, timbers torn and splintered into kindling-wood, only a fragment standing erect, to still further emphasize that awful force.

Fortunately, the building had been vacated, and, with the exception of a few superficial cuts and bruises received by the pards when hurled endlong by the force of the explosion, no harm had been done to mortal being.

The next few minutes were taken up with hasty explanations and no less hurried queries; every man and woman congregating there wanted to learn all about the ugly affair.

Hugh Eddlong was willing enough to tell all he knew, which was but little beyond the visible fact of an explosion.

"The dirty whelp never showed up long enough to let us tell what he might be, or what he looked like, you understand?"

"It was a man, wasn't it?"

"Something made up in the shape of a man, rather. No man would come at another fellow like this!" sweeping hand around toward yonder wrecked building. "And I'd give my best finger just to know what and who that same dirty whelp of Satan really is!"

Black Dog said nothing, as usual leaving the Happy-go-lucky Sport to speak for them both. He merely shrunk back when that voluble-tongued pard told all present how the Injun saved both of their lives through his rare presence of mind.

"I saw the spitting devil in air, and I felt it strike me right here," he said, tapping his broad bosom. "I knew, something like a fool in a half-waking dream, that mischief was in the air, but—that's all I did know, and mighty sight more than I would have known a moment later, only for Black Dog, yonder!"

Eddlong told how the redskin caught and instantly passed the infernal machine on, to spend its main force upon yonder ruin.

"Only for that, I do reckon our ribs would have been sticking up in air pretty, much like yonder studding!" he declared, then altering both tone and manner as he spoke on:

"Now, everybody! I didn't see that devil clearly enough to locate him, body or phiz, but this much I've got to say: Find who he was, and let me know while there's life enough left in his hide for just ten seconds' worth of fun, and I'll pay a couple of hundred dollars—just for good luck to the finder!"

With this offer as a further incentive to work, the crowd began to widen out in search of a possible clew to the author of that dastardly outrage; but Headlong Hugh was not quite done with the men of Hardpan, and so called forth in clear tones:

"Just one thing more, gentlemen, please!"

That hint proved to be sufficient, and when he saw that all eyes were turning his way, the Happy-go-lucky Hercules spoke on:

"Hope you'll overlook my slipping in a word or two of business, my good friends, but it's an honest fact that you are, one and all, more or less deeply concerned in the affair, after all."

"What is it, pardner?" asked one of that gathering.

"About the Homestake Mine. You may have heard that Seneca Spottsrond is laying claim to the property, but I'm here to represent the rights of the now sole owner, Harry Marqueduc—"

"Whar's the rope?" called forth a lusty voice from the shadows.

"If the rope is lacking, the bull-calf is on deck!" retorted the sport, defiantly. "A coward chipped in right then, and I'll give him cash enough to keep him on a drunk for one solid week if he can pluck up courage enough to step out in the clear and say it all over!"

Sudden silence reigned. No response came to that offer, and with a wave of hand, as though waiving the fraud away, Headlong Hugh spoke further:

"As white men and honest citizens, gentlemen, you are deeply interested in seeing this matter settled according to law and justice. For that reason, then,

I ask one and all of you—which leaves out the riff-raff and curs like the one who yelped but a bit since—to be on deck at the Homestake Mine to-morrow forenoon. Will you come?"

"You just bet we will, sport!"

"Good enough! Now, good-night to ye all, for I'm sleepy and have a couple of nights to make up for. Come, Injun; let's be mogging along!"

The two pards moved off in the direction of the hotel once more.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE HOMESTAKE CLAIMANTS.

In spite of all that had passed, and all that doubtless yet lay before him, Hugh Eddlong slept long and soundly, not lifting head from pillow until the morning sun was well in sight beyond the eastern hills.

Although it had been his intention to be quite early upon the debatable ground, the Happy-go-lucky Sport would not slight his breakfast or cut that animal enjoyment short.

"Take your time and make the most of it, Injun," he advised. "There's no telling how soon ye'll need the good of it, nor how long it'll be before we get another whack at a table so well supplied."

Black Dog grunted, doubtless in assent, for he certainly was no laggard with knife and fork.

Then, each one smoking a cigar as good as the hotel bar could provide, the pards moved off in the direction of the Homestake.

Not being inconveniently crowded by either friend or enemy, some confidential talk was indulged in by the way, but when they won a point from whence their first view of the disputed property could be had, both men stopped short, while Chonesta let fall something which was more than mere surprise.

Doubtless in hopes of both hearing and seeing something well worth the trouble they were taking, a large crowd had assembled near the Homestake, where sundry changes had been wrought very recently.

Among these showed quite a formidable-looking stockade of hastily thrown together timbers, blocking all admission to the tunnel-mouth, as well as to the rude office buildings hard by.

"Looks like it meant business, for a fact!" coolly commented Headlong Hugh, then moving leisurely forward once more, Black Dog following after the old fashion, black eyes glittering and bronzed hands tightly gripping Winchester.

Appearing not at all abashed or embarrassed, the sport gave cool greeting to one and all of the citizens there assembled, then cast a keen glance over that barricade.

Rather less formidable than it had appeared from a distance, and hardly one fitted for repulsing a strong, well-armed, and determined force, if well officered; still, it was sufficient to lend confidence to such fellows as were likely to be manning the place, just now.

"Looks as though some idiot had been taken with a claim-jumping fancy," was his easy comment, when that inspection was completed. "Who's at the bottom of it, gentlemen?"

There was no hesitation in giving an answer, and at least a dozen voices called out the name of Hardpan's rustler, Seneca Spottsround.

Of course this was no surprise to the Happy-go-lucky Sport, after his recent interview with the capitalist, yet he affected amazement.

"Not that I blame a fellow for wanting to own such a bonanza, you mind, but because I'd hardly take such a man for an everyday thief!"

"Speak up louder, sport, so he can hear ye," called forth one of the citizens. "He's in yonder, now!"

"Is that so? Then—I say, you fellow with nails and lumber to waste!"

A brief silence after this whimsical

summons, during which an indistinct glimpse could be caught through the stockade of men bustling about, then a rude gate was swung open barely far enough to permit a single man to slip through, then closed again.

A mutter of growing interest ran around the crowd of spectators, for all could recognize Seneca Spottsround, and all could see that the mine-owner was thoroughly armed, just as though he counted on war.

Headlong Hugh took a cool survey, while the capitalist was advancing in that direction, and never a word crossed his lips until Mr. Spottsround was nigh to hand.

"Ah, you, is it, sir?" he said, at length, giving a feigned start, as of surprise. "Surely you haven't been so foolishly extravagant as to throw away both work and money, building on another man's property?"

"I deny having done either, Mr. Eddlong," was the cold retort.

Headlong Hugh waved hand toward the stockade as he asked:

"Then what does all this mean, sir?"

"Nothing more than that I mean to defend my property against any and all pretenders who may come this way. Have you any further objections to offer, sir?"

"Well, for a starter, how's this: The property isn't yours, never was yours, never will be yours."

"I've heard that two negatives make an affirmative, but I never knew that three lies could be footed up as one truth," retorted Spottsround, who seemed to care little how soon the matter might come to a crisis.

"Walt, please," and the Happy-go-lucky Sport seemed to grow more bland and smiling the harsher terms were used. "I gave you fair warning only last night that this claim belonged wholly and solely to—"

"Myself! I have the papers to show for it whenever one with authority to ask such a favor wishes to examine them."

"Don't over-run the scent, please, my dear fellow. Nothing like getting at these matters in orderly fashion. So—as a starter: I demand full and immediate possession of the Homestake workings, before all of these reputable witnesses."

"By what shadow of right, even?"

"By the full right of ownership, if you are determined to spar against all reason, Mr. Spottsround. The Homestake Mine, with all its claims, now belongs wholly to me, individually!"

In spite of his cool and steady nerve, Seneca Spottsround seemed just a little taken aback by this terse statement, although he rallied as swiftly, demanding in harsh tones:

"What sort of proof can you have to back up such utterly preposterous claims, Mr. Eddlong? I hardly like to accuse you of lying, or even trying to run in a bare-faced fraud—"

"Well, now, I really wouldn't advise you to go quite that far, my dear fellow. For one thing, I have the documents to back up my claims, nor am I afraid to let any and every man in or near Hardpan take a fair look at them."

"What manner of documents, pray?"

"What's the matter with a bill of sale?"

"Nothing, provided it is regular. Mine is that, which brands the one you claim to hold as fraudulent on the face of it!"

"Touch lightly, please! My bill is signed by the then sole owner, Harry Marqueduc, who is—"

"A runaway assassin, with a reward put upon his head! A red-handed fraud, who sold his share of the Homestake to the nartner whom he afterward so brutally stabbed to death!" sternly cried Spottsround, fairly thrown off his balance by this cool assurance.

Under ordinary circumstances such words would have precipitated a fight, but just then Headlong Hugh was play-

ing an unusual hand for one of his fiery nature, and listened through all that outburst with cool composure.

"Look ye here, Mr. Spottsround," he said, speaking in even tones, although his big brown eyes were fairly aglow with suppressed emotions. "You're talking of my pard, my almost brother. A whiter, cleaner, honester lad never trod the footstool than Harry Marqueduc!"

"A branded assassin! A common cheat, who first sold his claim, then comes back with forged papers which—"

"Stop right where you are, Mr. Spottsround," sternly interrupted Headlong Hugh, one hand slipping inside his breast for the papers spoken of, while the other was flung up in a restraining gesture.

There was a bare possibility that this double gesture was misunderstood by the armed mercenaries yonder back of the stockade.

The two men were but a short distance apart, and as he spoke Headlong Hugh took a single step nearer his adversary, making that impulsive gesture; but nothing was further from his thoughts than a blow.

Yet from yonder stockade there came a bull-like roar, out of which could be distinguished the words:

"Don't ye slug him, ye overgrown devil! Don't ye—take that!"

A sharp explosion followed, the rifle shot plainly coming from that speaker, and with an involuntary cry the Happy-go-lucky Sport staggered back, one hand clapped against his side.

But, screaming like one in horrible agony, Seneca Spottsround spun half-way around, falling heavily to earth!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE HAPPY-GO-LUCKY SPORT ON TOP.

Shrill and fierce burst a yell from the Injun Pard, and almost like an echo his Winchester cracked, sending a pellet of lead straight as the finger of fate into that little cloud of blue vapor, through that loophole, and crashing through skin, bone, brain, and all—swiftly avenging that fall without!

Headlong Hugh swiftly rallied, his hand clasped over the hunting-cased watch to which he almost surely owed his life.

"Down 'em, lads!" he roared, charging in company with his red-skinned pard upon the stockade. "Take pay for murdering Spottsround, anyway!"

Almost as a single man the crowd surged forward, yelling in mad rage, stirred as they seldom were by that dastardly attempt at murder before their very eyes.

A few cast glances toward the fallen capitalist, who now lay like a dead man, but not one lingered to lend him aid; one and all seemed set on fire by that fierce call and headlong example.

The men within the stockade seemed taken as wholly by surprise, yet far less swift to rally; and it was not until Hugh, with Black Dog close to his shoulder, had fairly gained the stockade that one of the mercenary gang took thought of the firearms which Seneca Spottsround had supplied them with for holding the mine.

There was a mad rush and scramble; a wild uproar, where each man made noise enough for a round dozen; a fight at the stockade, but one which lasted barely a minute after Headlong Hugh picked up his pard and fairly tossed him over the barrier, then splintered a couple of pine plank with savage thrusts of his booted heel.

Once within the stockade the end came right swiftly, although the Homestake was not won without loss; blood flowed freely, and there were two other knaves ready to keep Bulldog Ben Beebe passage across the Styx when the glad shout of victory went up in good earnest.

One of the citizens had been killed outright, and several others received hurts of more or less gravity; but Headlong

Hugh had eyes and care for one being alone; for a pard whose fall had come to his knowledge first through the startled cry which shaped the words:

"Look! The Injun isn't—white hide, by thunder!"

An instant later the Hercules Sport was standing over the prostrate figure of he who had recently figured as Black Dog, guns in hand and voice ringing forth in fierce menace:

"Stand back, the pile o' ye! I'll kill the devil who dares even point a crooked finger at this—my pard!"

A half score seconds thus, then Headlong Hugh picked up the wounded man, holding him on broad bosom, while he backed into the adit, a veritable lion at bay!

"Back, one and all!" he shouted. "Back, I say! I'll clean out the whole town if you dare come for my pard!"

Sundry ominous cries were heard, and threats were spoken, but no man cared to take the lead where such a defender was giving fair warning; and then—the necessity soon vanished!

Among the wounded was Owen Quinn, and his nerve all melted away when he heard threats of bringing the rope into play, if only to avenge the dastardly shot which had so strangely laid Seneca Spottsround low.

"'Twas Bulldog Binny, sors!" groaned the terrified wretch, shivering more through terror of the rope than from his wounds. "An'—divil take me wid-out absolution av Spottsround worn't—he stobbed Moiles Rockweed, thin!"

It seemed an utterly preposterous charge, and not one of those who caught the words placed faith in the revelation; yet the renewed mention of that name, coupled with the recent tragedy, caused attention to be turned in that direction, and Seneca Spottsround was found alive, far from being a corpse, yet surely with a mortal wound.

The bullet intended by the revengeful Bulldog Beebe struck the heavy gold watch worn by Headlong Hugh in vest pocket, then glanced aside to tear a ragged way through the abdomen of the capitalist, inflicting an injury from which recovery was impossible!

Hugh Eddlong learned something of all this from where he stood at bay in front of the wounded Harry Marqueduc, and when convinced that the whole truth was about to come out, he called a truce, entering into compact with Mayor Strong, as Chief of the Hardpan Vigilantes, that no attempt should be made upon his pard's life within the week.

"And before that we'll have him showing as clear from guilt as you or I, Jimmy!" declared the Happy-go-lucky Sport.

And so it proved, not only inside of a week, but before another day had come and fairly spent itself.

Seneca Spottsround was removed to his own residence, there to receive the best of attention; but from the very first Dr. Branscombe had no hope to offer, gravely warning the mine magnate that death was certain, being but a question of hours.

At first the patient refused to give these words credence, but his iron nerve began to give way, and long enough before grim death claimed its rights the whole story was told and the truth made clear.

For many months past—ever since the wonderful richness of the claim had been made manifest—Seneca Spottsround had been plotting and scheming how he could easiest get hold of the Homestake.

Thanks to the peculiarly worded contract which the pards had signed in common, his task was rendered well-nigh hopeless, until—

An adroit, unscrupulous man can work much harm with his tongue, and so the arch-villain set to work, the result being that unfortunate quarrel between the Homestake Pards.

As fate would have it, Spottsround saw that coming together, and the actual collision was delayed sufficiently long for him to clap on a disguise, then start out from cover to stab—Harry Marqueduc, as he believed, until the fatal blow was struck!

Owen Quinn was the only eye witness to that foul blow, and he was not actually sure Seneca Spottsround played the assassin, until after a series of tests which he cunningly carried out to his own satisfaction.

With the light already cast upon the bold plot by Spottsround himself, nothing further need be said on this particular point. Enough that his daring schemes were foiled by the touch of death—a death intended for a vastly better man.

Owen Quinn declared that Bulldog Ben hurled that dynamite cartridge, hoping to thus effectually dispose of the dangerous sport; but more than one believed that the Irishman himself had made the futile attempt at murder.

Ginger Chump was one of the men killed while trying to hold the stockade, and thus his share in that decoy-note and death-trap affair was fully avenged.

Shortly before the heavy stupor of such a death fairly deadened his senses, Seneca Spottsround told how and why that note was written, and made perfectly clear the manner in which Dick Tate met his just reward.

All of this, naturally, was a sad and heavy blow to Jasper Spottsround, who certainly merited a better father; but Polly managed to win the "red-head" from his despondency, and in due course of time the twain became as one.

At nearly the same date, Harry Marqueduc placed a ring upon a certain finger of pretty Milly Fickeson's left hand, and gave her his first kiss as—not Black Dog, but—her husband!

Both Headlong Hugh and the original Chonesta were guests upon that happy occasion, and the most honored ones; but that goes without question, of course.

Lacking a genuine parent, worthy Mayor Strong filled the place of proud father, so far as "giving the bride away" was concerned; and then bantered the Happy-go-lucky Sport to a drinking bout for the championship of Hardpan, all to be in honor of the bridal couple!

And for once in his eventful career, let it be recorded that—in place of taking whisky, the sport took water!

Having seen his "side-partner" safely through his sore troubles, leaving him blessed beyond compare, Happy-go-lucky Hugh bade all a jolly farewell, saying:

"I've had a polite sufficiency of life in town, people. I'm going off on the tramp once more!"

"Me too, you bet!" echoed Black Dog, the Cherokee.

THE END.